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THE AUCTIONING OF MARY ANGEL

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THE AUCTIONING OF MARY ANGEL

CONINGSBY DAWSON

AUTHOR OF "THE GARDEN WITHOUT WALLS," ETC.

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THE AUCTIONING OF MARY ANGEL

THE DEVIL TEMPTS MARY ANGEL

"Years ago, Mary Angel, when you hadn't been born and the swains who sigh for your beauty were squalling in their cradles, I was in love with your mother."

I had expected to stagger her by my information. I was handing her the key to the riddle of my fondness for her. But modern youth refuses to be staggered. It mocks the sentiment of Methuselahs who have attained the age of forty.

"That's so long ago, Uncle Biff, that it's hardly worth discussing." She seized the chance to switch the spotlight on herself. "Nothing that happened before I existed seems real. Have you ever had that sensation? It's too insulting to acknowledge that there was ever a time when

I wasn't. I refuse to believe it. I must have been somewhere. I wonder what I was doing."

"What you've been doing ever since. They wanted a little peace in heaven, so they sent you down to earth to make glad eyes at us mortals."

"You're unfair," she pouted, though I could see she was flattered. "I never make glad eyes—not consciously."

"You're making them now," I rebuked her.

She patted my head where the hair is growing thin. "Why should I at you? They'd be wasted."

An amusing thought struck her; she began to chuckle.

"If you had married Mummy, I would have been your daughter."

"Which is the reason——" I commenced emotionally; but she cut me short.

"You got off lightly. Weren't you lucky?"

Probably I share the obsession of most bachelors that I could bring up children more efficiently than their parents. I was on the point of saying something to this effect, when Mary Angel forestalled me.

"Uncle Biff, are all people of your generation asses?"

(I ought to explain that I am not her uncle, save by right of affection—also that Biff is an

absurd name of her own invention that has survived from childhood.)

"Every generation has seemed to consist of asses to the generation that follows," I temporized. "But you're too broad-minded to class all your seniors in the same category."

She crossed her attractive legs. She wears bobbed skirts to match her hair. Having lit a cigarette to emphasize her poise, she faced me.

"I said asses and I mean asses." With a dreamy stare she watched a puff of smoke ascend in spirals. "You know quite well to whom I'm referring—to Mummy and Daddy. If they weren't asses, they would be something worse. I prefer to think they're asses. Look at what they've done to me."

"I can't argue till I've heard your accusation."

"They wrapped me up in silver paper and auctioned me off as a prize package. No one was to know what was inside the package till he'd purchased. It wasn't playing the game to exaggerate my worth simply in order to tempt a bidder."

"No one could exaggerate your worth, Mary Angel." I caressed her rebellious hand. "As to playing the game, that's precisely what they were doing. They were playing the game accord-

ing to rules laid down for all American families of your family's importance. If you had not become a bride within a year or so of being launched as a débutante, your rarity would have shrunk in value. Your parents would have blamed themselves for having failed you. The first duty parents owe to their rose-bud daughters is——"

She pressed a finger against my lips and completed my sentence.

"—To foist them on some boob who'll support them for them."

"If your parents blundered, Mary Angel——"

"—Which they certainly did, Uncle Biff."

"—It was through over-anxiety to secure your future. There aren't enough marrying young men to go round. To make one girl supremely more desirable than the rest someone has to do a lot of window-dressing. You'll do it, too, if ever you have a daughter."

"I'll be damned if I will." She shot upright. "You ought to write a book about me, quoting me as a horrible example."

To keep her mind off her shipwreck, that is what I am doing.

"For the love of Mike, don't make it sloppy," she advised me.

"What am I to make it?" I inquired humbly.

"Truthful," she retorted. "It'll be difficult, Uncle Biff; people of your age don't know how to be honest. I guess I'll have to help you. It's to be the reflection of my naked soul. It must contain nothing but facts—not a stitch of clothing."

"But my darling child,"—I feigned horror—"consider the damage to my reputation."

"So's your old man." She made mincemeat of my objection. "I'm offering you the chance of your life to become famous. Our book has to be an accusation of your generation by mine. Our first accusation must be that marriage, as manipulated by parents, is the most rascally confidence trick ever perpetrated. Misrepresentation of daughters ought to be as punishable as manslaughter."

"Even with my influence,"—I resented her assumption that I am not already famous—"we couldn't persuade any publisher to print a book like that. But you're not serious."

"Never more so." She winked at me with the mischief of the little girl who had played hide-and-seek with me in days gone by. "You haven't heard the half of it. I'm out to debunk the world of all the rot that your generation has

printed about mine. If youth's flaming to-day, who set it on fire? Bootlegging, money-crazy papas and mamas. No wonder marriage is on the wane. Who wants to be like her parents? They can't be wise for themselves; yet they insist on being wise for us."

"What do you call being wise?" I questioned feebly.

"Being happy yourself and making other people happy," she answered promptly.

In her enthusiasm she perched herself on the arm of my chair.

"If we could write all this, we'd have struck as brave a blow for freedom as Charlotte Corday when she stabbed Marat in his bath."

"But why emulate a murderess?"

"When I was seventeen," she hurried on, "I began a diary. I glanced through it this morning. It's simply pathetic how noble I thought life was. Now that I'm a disillusioned old woman" (she's twenty-one and lovelier than ever), "that diary breaks my heart. I couldn't read it without crying."

Her eyes were filling.

"What shall we call this magnum opus?" I spoke quickly to avert tragedy.

At once the tears withdrew and she smiled.

"I thought one found the title last."

Next day when I called she was full of titles:

"How about *Glorifying the American Girl?*" she suggested. "It's a bit cynical; but you get the idea, don't you? They ignore us till we're ready for the market; then they glorify us, palm us off and forget us. Or here's another: *Marriage à la Mode.* The heroine's biography falls into six parts: her coming-out, engagement, wedding, honeymoon and separation."

I had been counting.

"But you've mentioned only five."

"Don't be greedy. I'll be living the sixth while you're working on the others. Be grateful for what you've got."

Anything to restore her interest in living. At twenty-one she believes she's finished. It must be awful to sit there in four rooms at the top of an apartment house expecting nothing. Especially awful after all the fuss that was made over her and the hectic brilliance by which she was surrounded. Except for myself and the colored girl, Louisa, who works half-time for her, nobody comes near her. From her windows one can gaze across the Jersey meadows to New York. On clear days the skyscrapers stand up

like masts of adventure. By turnpikes, tubes, and railroads, other young things who are what she was are hurrying to lunch parties, theatres, dances, to be met by eager escorts who have borrowed their fathers' cars and hip-flasks. She's astute when she asks who finances youth's bonfire.

Having bidden her good-bye, I paused on the threshold.

"You mentioned a diary. Don't mistake me; I haven't promised to become your collaborator. If I were allowed to skim its pages, I might be persuaded."

"Old dear," she embraced me, "you're due for the deep end. No man can resist me."

I don't like such talk even when it is intentionally flippant. Why say things calculated to make another person feel uncomfortable? My motives in visiting her are the highest. I've known her from the cradle.

That night I sat late, poring over copy books filled with round, girlish handwriting. I was making the acquaintance of a Mary Angel whose existence nobody, including myself, has suspected.

• • •

At this point I must make a confession: recently I have not approved of Mary Angel. Luckily one does not need to approve in order to worship. If she were anyone but Mary Angel I should say that she has received her deserts. Chickens come home to roost—even the little fluffy chickens that a heart-breaker hatches.

I haven't the least idea how the trick is worked. She enters a room looking harmless, scarcely raising her dove's eyes; instantly every male is electrified. They shed their partners and flock about her. It's impossible to blame her, for she appears to give no encouragement. Men of whatever age, even mine, not to mention senile old buffers, fall victims to her charm. If she were divorced to-morrow, the queue would form again. What I fear for her is that she may become a professional collector of alimony. I cannot define her attraction, unless it is that her amiability promises romance. To me she seems to lack a proper sense of responsibility—which is a fault she inherits from her mother.

At her age her mother exercised a similar fascination. When our engagement had been all but announced, she tossed me aside that she might marry Harry Angel. She broke the news very tenderly, I remember, blaming fate, not

herself, for her change of choice. She wept bitterly on my shoulder, begging me to remain her friend and to attend her wedding in order to silence gossip. After her marriage she kept me tethered by continual demands for sympathy.

There was nothing in the least secretive about our intimacy. She would slip her arm through mine in the presence of her husband, making me feel advertised and foolish.

"Harry doesn't understand me," she would tease him. "You know you don't, Harry." Then sidling up to him, she would plump herself in his lap. "But Harry's awfully dear."

It was his turn to be embarrassed. He would grin sheepishly.

"Thank God I don't, Lilian. Say it in your prayers every night."

She would shrug her shoulders with a gesture of feigned forlornness.

"Isn't he an old bear?"

She was blonde and slight in those days, of the Persian-kitten type, with magnificent slate-blue eyes. Harry tolerated my attentions. Certainly he never feared me. More than once he tried to advise me.

"Why don't you get a wife of your own, old chap?"

But I flattered myself that I was Sir Launcelot, setting an example to an unappreciative King Arthur of the chivalry that was due his wife.

From Mary's birth I date the waning of my admiration. The unprofitableness of the game I had been playing became apparent; it was ridiculous to pretend that I had a share in a woman who was the mother of another man's child. My quite irrational feeling was that she had betrayed me. Only politeness compelled me to peer into the cradle. But when that little bundle of humanity, so appealingly helpless, was placed in my arms, I realized the extent to which I had been cheated. I wanted Mary.

Here, had I the time, I would pause to examine the axiom "Love is blind." I don't believe there was ever a man fell in love with his eyes wide open. Not only that—a lover wilfully courts deception—which is the reason younger brothers' opinions are rarely consulted as to the sweetness of their sisters' characters.

I saw Lilian at last with the unprejudiced clearness of a younger brother's eyes. From envying her husband, I began to feel that I was under an obligation to him. By substituting for me he had spared me. I still considered Lilian a very rare and valuable masterpiece, but better

suited to a public gallery than to private ownership. What I'm attempting to say is that her sheer genius for stimulating homage reduced her husband to the drabness of a background. Her attitude to Harry grew to be that of a philanthropist; his duty was to be forever grateful to her because, when she had had all the world to choose from, she had bestowed herself on him exclusively. His debt was swollen beyond hope of liquidation when she presented him with Mary.

Feminine logic as exemplified by Lilian tickles my sense of humor. Most girls marry for the same reasons that boys accept their first employment: because they want to be rid of parental control and because they can't do any better. The price a boy pays is that he becomes a private in the army of commerce, kicked from pillar to post till he wins his stripes. A girl's price is—or used to be at the period of which I write—that she bore babies.

To hear Lilian talk you might have supposed that Harry had made her the victim of an unnatural experiment, to which neither her consent had been asked nor any act of hers had contributed. She wasn't resentful; her chief at-

traction is her unfailing pleasantness. But she vowed that she had been made the vehicle of motherhood's sacred miracle for the first and last time. At the earliest opportunity she stuck a bottle in Mary's mouth and decamped to an institution renowned for its massage. Since then her flights to Vichy have become a habit. She's a woman who was born with a single talent—to be physically lovely. She has cultivated it to the *n*th power. The only criticism I ever heard Harry venture was implied rather than stated: "O beauty, beauty! What crimes have been committed in thy name!"

Harry, it will be guessed, is a man of peace as well as a philosopher. In his domestic relations he is as well trained and unobtrusive as his butler. If a cloud threatens, he has a magic means of winning back the sunshine: he signs a check. His only fault is that he respects his wife more as a work of art than as a human being. He has never been known to thwart her and is regarded as an ideal husband.

Mary's birth made me his friend. Till then, being scarcely more than boys, we had met with veiled hostility. As our common love for Lilian had held us apart, so our shared love for Lilian's

daughter drew us together. We entered into an unacknowledged conspiracy to compensate her for her mother's frequent absences.

Mary was a prize baby, all dimples and smiles. Her father and I used to meet after office hours and hurry home to gain a glimpse of her; and later, when she began to toddle, to share her evening play hour. There can be no doubt that we spoiled her, showering her with presents. We used to treasure her quaint sayings and quote them to each other. Everything she did and said seemed marvelous. "And God bless Uncle Biff," she would name me in her prayers. But when Lilian returned from her latest cure we had a tendency to repress our raptures. By a lilt in her laugh or a mocking gesture, she had a trick of making our worship seem foolish. Mind you, it wasn't that she didn't adore Mary; but she was less intense, more sensible, accepting her as a detail in the landscape, whereas with us the sun rose and set for her—which had been the task we had allotted the sun as regards Lilian till Mary had put in an appearance. So you see Lilian had her justifications.

"Time enough to dethrone me when I've lost my good looks," she would rebuke us.

Quite early in her young life Mary guessed

that our tenderness was making her her mother's rival.

"Wait till we're alone, Uncle Biff," she would warn me. "Mummy thinks it's silly."

When a beautifying pilgrimage had started, restraint vanished; we could be silly to our hearts' content. Those were the days of hide-and-seek, played riotously under beds and in cupboards; no place in the house was sacred. Before Harry's key had turned in the latch an excited fairy in frilly skirts would open to us.

"Daddy first, because he's Daddy."

Passionate arms would strangle Harry.

"And now Uncle Biff, because he's funny."

Once I sprouted a moustache, but cut it off because she objected that it prickled.

After she had attained the age of ten she grew more sedate. Romping games were banished in favor of stories. It must have been about this time she calmly announced that, when she was big, she intended to marry me. We were to have babies—all of them boys. Not one lonely little girl.

The war cut short this pleasantness. For me it occupied two years, during which I received letters from her, ingeniously misspelt. I could tell, as months went by, that her memory of me

was fading. She was conjuring me as young, whereas I was looking ten years older. When I returned and she was brought home from boarding school to meet me, I read at once her disappointment. Later in the evening, when her mother came down from kissing her good-night, she greeted me with the news, "Poor little Mary! I found her sobbing."

Her father became concerned.

"Has anyone hurt her feelings?"

"He has." Lilian glanced at me. "She says he has even grayer hair than Daddy's."

All the work of winning her confidence had to be begun again. Things were never the same between us. I suppose she had idolized me, as young girls will older men, into something that I wasn't. My worn appearance had estranged her. Now that she was away from home I saw her more rarely. She was receding like a phantom escaped from fairyland. During the vacations I took her to theaters. She sat facing me across lunch tables, virginal and embarrassed, striving to act the young lady. Conversation was halting. Her eyes would lift, inattentive to what I was saying, and search among other tables. At last the truth dawned: she craved youth—she was wasting her sweetness on me.

At fifteen—or wasn't it sixteen?—she was whisked away to France, there to receive the final polish that would fit her for society. I visited her once at her convent as I passed through Paris. When she entered the room my heart stood still; she had become the image of her mother. It was as though the hands on the clock had been flicked back twenty years. I wanted to be a boy, to think the thoughts of a boy, that I might laugh and jest as I had with her mother. All kinds of memories came flooding back of Lilian's girlhood—her sweet slyness, her gay treacheries, but most of all her dearness. Knowing all that I did about her, could we both have become young, I would again have implored her to marry me.

The spell was broken by Mary. In the excitement of seeing a home face she became voluble. Her pretty head was full of clothes and the boys she would attract at St. Jean de Luz, where her mother was taking her for the summer.

It never occurred to me that she would need me again. I was as road-weary and second-hand as an out-of-date automobile. She seemed so swift and vigorously modern.

Now every moment I can spare I hurry away from business, tap on the magic door of her

apartment, and am admitted. Despite her surface sophistication, she has become again the eager child who threw passionate arms about me.

"And now Uncle Biff, because he's funny."

The weight of her young tragedy never lifts from my mind. I play Santa Claus to amuse her, bringing her presents. But of what avail are presents?

* * *

Her diary explains so much. I pick out sentences and string them together almost at random.

"My earliest friends were servants. I ate and slept with hired people like a puppy. When I grew too old for that, I was sent to boarding school, where more paid people took care of me. I've always longed to be loved. . . . Papa needed me most awfully once. He may still. Very soon he became afraid to show his need because of Mummy. Uncle Biff was fond of me, too; but never really for myself—only because I reminded him of Mummy.

"When I was more little than I am now, I used to sit for hours at the window, watching the street and wondering whether anyone warm and comforting would ever happen. I used to

dream that a taxi would draw up against the pavement and a boy in a fur coat would beckon. When I ran down the steps bareheaded, he would seize my hands and tell me, 'All my life I've been searching for you.' Then he would wrap me in his fur coat and rush me into the taxi. When the door had shut, he would call me darling and say I was heaps more beautiful than Mummy. But I expect all men are like Daddy; they think about nothing but business and money. It'll be heaps safer to become a nun."

And so on, till, like a yell of glory, "Everything's splendid. At last Mummy wants me."

• • •

Next time I went to visit Mary Angel she was a trifle self-conscious.

To reach her one has to search through two rows of names and press a button beneath the card on which her name is printed. If she's willing to see you she presses an answering button and the handle on the hall door rattles automatically. You're invisibly admitted to a long narrow corridor. The atmosphere is a blend of smells, prompting you to guess what each invisible family has eaten for dinner. The roar of invisible radios, going full blast, assails you—the

deep oily bass of announcers, the delirium of jazz bands, the tortured shriek of sopranos. You press another button and, if you're lucky, find the elevator working. Quite often it's out of commission, having been wilfully disconnected for the private diversions of the janitor—in which case you drag yourself up four flights of stairs. The bedlam of the radios waxes and wanes between landings, till by the time you have attained the top floor you enter a region of comparative quiet. At the end of a bare corridor, the exact duplicate of the one on the ground floor, is a door which might well open into space. You press a third button and there she stands, bobbed hair, bobbed skirts, as smiling and welcoming as a Botticelli angel.

This time, being anxious, she has the door already open and is peering across the threshold.

"Why, you poor old bird—you're quite winded!" Then, noticing the package beneath my arm, "Have you read my diary?"

"Not so much of the old bird," I chide her. "A man's in his prime at forty. Yes, I've read it."

"Then you know the disgusting truth about me?"

We cross her miniature hall and seat ourselves on the couch in her miniature drawing room.

Everything within sight is a wedding present. She received so many before the ceremony that private detectives had to be engaged to sleep in the house. The silver picture frames on the polished Chippendale, the expensive vases and bric-à-brac lend an incongruous touch of sumptuousness. Facing us are three windows in a line, black with night and enigmatic. Far away spread chains of lights, interspersed by dark patches which by day are factories or the roofs of houses. Following the chains of lights the lamps of automobiles race. One marvels at their haste and questions whither.

"I was a morbid little beast, wasn't I?"

"Why did you wish to become a nun?" I counter.

She slips a friendly arm through mine.

"They're so protected. But you've not told me what you think of my diary."

"It reminds me of a poem which keeps asking, 'Oh, to recall! What to recall?' It makes several suggestions, which you'll probably think sloppy. For instance, roses under snow, stars that toward the water go, greenness after rain. You see, the person who wrote it was trying to recover his loveliest memory. To all his first suggestions he answers, 'Not these.' Then he thinks again and

cries, 'Laughter of a girl that's dead—Oh, this!' "

"And pray, what good did that do him?" she inquires sensibly.

"No good, perhaps. But reading your diary set me groping after the loveliest thing that had ever happened to me. It wasn't my love affair with your mother; it was your affection for me when you were so little and soft that you could slip into your prayers, 'And God bless Uncle Biff.' That's what has made me long to hear your laughter again."

"And you never will, because that girl's dead." She slants her eyes at me. "I get you."

She sits silent a moment, then darts off at a tangent.

"I shouldn't have made a good nun."

"What convinced you," I ask, "that at last your mother wanted you? Mind you, I'm not allowing that she didn't always want you."

Mary curls a shapely leg underneath her and withdraws to the opposite end of the couch.

"If ever I have a baby, Uncle Biff, I'll make it believe that I couldn't have done without it. It wouldn't be fair not to. Babies don't ask to be born. People who bear them owe them an apology. That's how my generation feels about

babies. My mother made me feel that I was the one who owed the apology—that I'd forced myself on her, done her a sort of injury. She was so busy trying to stay young that she had no time for me. I dated her—that was why she tried to escape me. People could always guess her age when they saw us together."

"You're too hard on your mother. I disagree with you, Mary Angel."

"You would, you old ostrich. But you've got to face facts if you and I are going to collaborate. A man's rated by his ability—not by his handsomeness. But a woman's nothing if she's not pretty. I know what you're going to tell me: that this is a day when women go into business and find their happiness in broader directions. It's a lie! A woman who can't make at least one man go crazy over her dies insulted. So we come back to where we started, which is where the world started—her prettiness is about all a woman has to market."

"You've written here," I tap her diary, " 'Everything's splendid. At last Mummy wants me.' Why at last and what made her want you?"

Mary leans toward me, so delighted to clinch her argument that she almost butts me.

"The bloom was on the peach. My prettiness was ripe to be marketed."

The idea that she was marketed is becoming an obsession. She talks as though Americans were orientals who sell their daughters into slavery. I try to point out to her that girls are only auctioned in the sense that they themselves do the auctioning. They put themselves up to competition and select their lovers by a process of elimination.

"If I'm a sentimentalist," I tell her, "you're a cynic. A cynic is a human mole—the blindest creature that crawls. It's got that way through burrowing underground; it spends its life escaping from the daylight. A cynic—I'm quoting a high authority—is a person who knows the price of everything and the value of nothing."

"Bully for you! I couldn't have phrased it better. That's what your rotten system—against which my generation is rebelling—did to me: it taught me to know the price of everything and the value of nothing. If I liked a boy who hadn't money, the affair was choked off. Any boy whose father owned millions was encouraged. I have faults enough, Lord knows; but left to myself I'm not a tuft-hunter and a money-snob."

"Your mother is—surely that's not what you're hinting?"

"Of course I am." She amazes me by her boldness. "All mothers are. Did you ever hear of a mother who bestowed her daughter on a poor man when a rich one was available?"

Unable to remember an example, I disguise my defeat with flattery.

"I supposed you young people were all so emancipated that you disposed of yourselves."

"Rid yourself of the thought," she advises me. "If we become moles and cynics, it's because we've inherited our environments from our parents. We've had their environments rammed down our throats. We've been made the—what's the word?—the pawns of our mothers' social ambitions. If you don't believe it, take what happened to me at St. Jean de Luz."

"What did happen? Nothing very awful, I'm certain. All I know is that you came back as exquisite as money could make you."

She helps herself to a cigarette.

"As money could make me! You've said it. If I describe my symptoms to you, Dr. Biff, please don't struggle to be moral. You've a most put-me-off habit of interrupting—which is probably the reason you never married."

"I'll restrain myself," I promise, "if you'll stop hammering your mother."

• • •

"You think I'm hard-boiled,"—she glances at me meltingly— "because I refuse to humbug or be humbugged. The nice young females of your courting days cheated like fortune-tellers and, when you found them out, wept on your shoulder. That's all altered; if we show more of our figures, we're at least honest. I'm sorry, Uncle Biff, that the little girl whose laughter used to delight you has passed to the beyond; but you can't soft-boil an egg when once it's been hard-boiled. Like all eggs I was born soft. You mustn't demand the unreasonable."

She flicks her ash carelessly.

"The boiling process began when Mummy removed me from the convent. Till then I'd believed all the goodness the nuns had taught me. God had a Book of Judgment in which He recorded all my actions. Life was as simple as a sum in subtraction. My naughtiness was deducted from my virtue. If there remained a credit in my favor, it would defray the transportation of my soul to heaven. Obviously since everyone was straining to get to heaven, it was

common sense to do one's best to be virtuous. One must say one's prayers, humiliate one's body, be charitable. Far away in America my parents must be striving for the same perfection, since they paid the nuns thus to instruct me. The truth fell shatteringly.

"Mummy arrived looking worldly and expensive. She smelt like a garden of roses. I buried my nose in her. She whisked me off to a hotel in the Champs-Elysées and at once sent for dressmakers. She outfitted me like a princess, I was her new plaything. Then my preliminary canter in sophistication commenced. We attended theaters where infidelities that I had considered sins were brandished as matters for jest. It was contradictory, confusing. We drove home beneath stars and arc lights along boulevards to cuddle in the same bed. I became dippy about Mummy. She was continually complimenting me.

" 'Little darling, I had no idea you'd grown to be so lovely.'

Having scrapped my convent uniforms, she set to work redecorating me inside and out. I was introduced to lipstick and all the tricks of make-up—vanities against which the nuns had warned me. She bobbed and permanented my hair. She threw away my corsets, replacing

them and my et-ceteras with garments so scanty that I felt almost drafty. When I say threw them away, I'm not exaggerating. We discarded them with an absurd ritual. Waiting till nightfall, we dropped them into the Seine from one of the bridges.

" 'Couldn't give them to anyone,' Mummy laughed; 'nobody would accept them. Besides, I'd hate to have it known that my daughter had been so old-fashioned.'

"How gay we were! And yet it was difficult to grasp the logic which governed this wholesale reversal of values. If the nuns had been right about humiliating the body, then Mummy was a sinner. But if the nuns had been wrong, why had Mummy paid them to discipline me in errors?"

"One minute." I forget my promise not to interrupt. "You're difficult to please, young lady. When your mother didn't bother about you, you blamed her. When she did bother about you and made you dippy over her, you still blame her."

"I don't." Mary smoothes her abbreviated skirt in a futile effort to prevent her knees from showing. "Far from blaming her, I'm sorry for any woman who's bamboozled herself when she

hoped she was bamboozling others. Mummy's deceived herself in so many ways that it isn't even funny. She pretends to mistake Daddy's indifference for affection because he hands her money. She's fibbed about her age till I don't believe she knows it. The bad taste she can't forgive in me is that I allowed my husband to escape, when to have kept him would have ruined him. She thrives on insincerity, whereas I have to be sincere or I'd stifle."

Her eyes are dry, but her voice is husky. I pat her hand. She ignores my sympathy.

"You were outlining your symptoms," I coax her.

"Let's skip to St. Jean," she takes up the thread. "You mustn't confuse me with the person I am now; I was then the same little girl who used to romp with you, only stretched out longer. The blanks in my knowledge were appalling. I hadn't the foggiest notion about sex, about why men covet women or anything like that. Everybody with whom I associated knew the things I didn't. I was decked out to allure, gagged and blindfolded by ignorance. I did things which to me seemed innocent, without in the least guessing the provocative meaning attributed to them by onlookers.

"The fast set at St. Jean consists in the main of Spanish men and American women—divorcées, grass-widows, ambitious climbers out to marry their daughters to a title—the same as me and Mummy. Spanish men look like gigolos when they're young and like bull fighters when they're old. Whatever their age they have the morals of monkeys. They distrust their own women so much that they lock them up. Naturally they regard American wives traveling without their husbands as amateur cocottes in search of adventure. You can't blame them; you never saw such baby-dolls. Your American woman in Europe is so terror-stricken of being thought provincial that she'll make any sacrifice to appear smart. If it's the fashion to enamel the knees and roll the stockings, she does it. In her effort to be broad-minded she allows herself to get chatty with any well-dressed gallant. As a consequence she gets accosted so often that she becomes convinced that her husband and his hard-working pals back home have underestimated her charm. Sooner or later someone rouses her passion. One of two things follow: either she grows frightened and books her return passage or she blooms into a Cleopatra and cables hubby to renew her letter of credit. Meanwhile yachts

drop anchor in the harbor. Sunlight pours in a deluge. Dance music tinkles. Up and down the coast love-nests are dotted to which one can dash off in automobiles. One's only duty is to be popular. The sum in subtraction between naughtiness and virtue seems niggardly."

"Is my niece attempting to teach her uncle to suck eggs?" I inquire. "What's the purpose of this child's first guide to European flirtations?"

"It isn't a child's first guide," she withers me. "It's a lecture on what not to do when bringing out a daughter. The beach is the place to get accosted. Mummy had bought me a white, one-piece bathing suit sufficiently daring to attract attention. For the first few days we lay on the sands, smeared with cocoanut oil, trying to raise a tan. Anywhere else we would have been arrested for exposure, cocoanut oil being the main item of our clothing; but I was quickly learning that conscience has nothing to do with decency and that whatever the majority do is proper. I questioned Mummy and discovered that the only crime for a woman is to be neglected.

"Well, we weren't neglected. We scraped acquaintance with strangers and were intro-

duced by them to other strangers. Our entertainment started with cocktail parties. Very soon we belonged to a crowd. We turned night into day, danced till dawn, rose at eleven. We weren't doing wrong because everybody was doing it. As a further excuse Mummy explained that this visit to St. Jean was the first step in her campaign for putting me on the social map. Compatriots who might sniff at us in New York, abroad were likely to prove quite affable. I must single out the useful ones and freeze on to them."

She turns to read in what spirit I am accepting her revelations. One of the many ways in which the modern girl makes men of my age appear ancient is to show maternal tenderness for our lamblike purity.

"This isn't all news." I gaze at my boots. "Long ago there was a war and I went on leave to Paris."

"But you're not sufficiently shocked, Uncle Biff. I'm sure you can't realize what I'm trying to tell you. You're like the rest of American men who let their women wander: you're either too indifferent to care what we do or too conceited to believe that we're capable of doing it. Some husband ought to break loose and spank his spouse."

"Public opinion frowns on spankings," I stay her. "Let's get back to white yachts and sunshine."

"St. Jean was a dream." She clasps her hands in remembered ecstasy. "In the mornings we bathed; during the afternoon we danced or played tennis; after nightfall we crowded into automobiles and went plunging through the dusk to faery palaces.

"Presently I began to glean stories—that Mrs. So-and-So had become Mr. Somebody's mistress. When I recounted them to Mummy, she affected superiority: 'This isn't a convent. I'm introducing you to society.' " Mary caught her breath. "You'd scarcely believe, Uncle B., the hurdles fluffy, middle-aged women take when they've ditched their husbands. St. Jean was an eye-opener."

I consult my watch surreptitiously.

"To what are you leading?"

"To my first love affair. Within a month all kinds of men had tried to kiss me. None of them had succeeded. My first kiss was something that I was saving for the boy in a fur coat, of whom I had dreamed since I was little. Amorousness to which I had no intention of responding rather amused me. I viewed love aloofly as a disease

from which I would never suffer, and became expert in detecting its progressive stages. The first warning came when a man schemed perpetually to be alone with me. The second when, on the slightest pretext, he would brush against me. The third when, having got me to himself, he sank into idiocy and was puzzled what to do with me. The fourth when, having dived at my mouth and missed it, he almost lost his balance. This was a sign that I had permitted him to go far enough. According to his age and deportment, I applied one of several strategies. Are you condemning me as a malicious little bandit?"

"All maids of seventeen are angelic devils," I tell her shortly. "But explain your strategies. Perhaps we can compare notes."

"I had several." She squints down her agreeable retroussé nose. "A good one was to sneeze and pretend I'd caught cold. Another was to remember a pressing appointment. In desperate cases I employed a desperate remedy: I declared that I was already engaged or at least had an understanding with a boy in America."

"My dear child," I feel it my duty to take her down a peg, "you weren't as original as you fancied. Your antediluvian mother practised all those wheezes years before you were created."

But one has to get up early to take the shine out of Mary. She smiles impishly.

"It was from Mummy I learned them. The night came, however, when my technique failed me. I can grin in remembrance, but the results weren't pleasant. There was a Brazilian with a waxy face and the straight features of an Indian, who managed to include himself on all our parties. He was a personage at St. Jean, for he'd broken the bank at the Casino. Mummy was eternally singing his praises and he was eternally forcing his attentions. When he was anxious to dance with me, he always danced with her first. You can imagine how that flattered her.

"There was an Englishman who followed us. He never tried to be introduced, but wherever we went I caught him watching. He looked like you, Uncle Biff, only younger. Because of that I felt safe when he was present.

"Well, one night we'd stayed late at Biarritz, at a restaurant where Russian archdukes and princesses did the waiting. When we rose, Mummy and I got separated. The Brazilian offered to drive me. While we were passing between shuttered houses, his only thought seemed to be to hurry me home. I was beginning to wonder how I'd offended, when in the darkest part

of the road he slammed on the brakes. Without giving me time to dodge, he grabbed me and glued his lips to mine. Having no knife with which to stab him, I regret to say I bit him. That made him eloquent. Tears dribbling down my cheeks, I was compelled to listen to his outpourings. He worshipped my tiny hands, my tripping feet, my saucy nose. When one boiled down his professions, all he was asking was that I would live with him.

" 'But I hate you. I wouldn't marry you for the world,' I tried to squelch him.

" 'Neither would I you. I'm not asking you to marry me, my lady tiger.'

"Mercifully, when affairs had reached this crisis, the glares of a following automobile fell on us like a searchlight. I yelled for help. The Brazilian was seized by the throat, forced to his knees, and ordered to beg my pardon. The next thing I knew I had changed cars and was sobbing beside my Englishman. Driving with one hand and keeping his free arm about me, he comforted me as nicely as you would have done, Uncle Biff. That's enough for to-night. How time's flown!"

"You're playing me the old bedtime-story trick, Mary Angel, that I used to play you. And

you've left off at the very point where a dozen pages are torn from your diary. Won't you tell me in a handful of words what happened?"

"I will not. A mere handful wouldn't do justice to the subject. If you stay here any later, there'll be a first-class scandal. Your gray hairs won't excuse you."

Tossing me my coat and hat, she thrusts me into the corridor.

The elevator has ceased running. As I descend by the stairs, I meet surly male inhabitants leading their wives' dogs for a final airing. I hear one greet another, "Hell! We didn't do this when we captured Belleau Wood."

Quite recently, Mary informs me, certain brides who have been primitive enough to obey nature's promptings have been given notice to quit their apartments, the landlord having objected to the untidiness of prams littering his hallway.

"Gives the place a low look," is his excuse.

A funny world in which yapping tikes are more welcome than young humans! Why don't men take a hand in running their homes? Mary's right. As a bachelor I agree with her. American husbands are spineless. They ought to form

themselves into a union with "Rights for husbands" as their slogan. Their first demand should be that a marriage is annulled the moment the breadwinner is ordered to risk his health for the convenience of a dog.

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"Let me see," I consult the final paragraph of my notes. "You had reached the point at which your English knight-errant was behaving as nicely as I would have done in similar circumstances. I very much doubt the assertion; but I won't dispute it."

"Then we'll call it an armistice." She pats my shoulder. "You're a splendid collaborator; you do all the work while I do all the talking. You love to listen and I love to reveal myself. Our relation is idyllic."

"I'm not here," I try to bring her to earth, "to help you keep your hand in."

She's as impervious to correction as a duck's back to water.

"Milk or lemon!" she asks innocently.

"Whichever you choose," I rebuke her. "I'm not here to help you keep your hand in, was what I was saying. I refuse to be a lay-figure."

"Don't get you." She passes me my cup. "I've given you lemon."

"Then you'd better get me, Mary Angel. I'm here to do business, not to flirt."

"Poor darling!" She peers at me. "You're suspicious. You're not used to women being kind to you."

"More women have been kind to me——" I bluster.

She cuts me short.

"Don't boast. If we agree that it's worth recording, perhaps we'll write your story next. At present, I'm the one who's providing the human interest. By the way, at my coming-out party did you notice anything restrained, defiant, bottled-up about me? You didn't? I'm astonished."

I throw my mind back three years to the launching of Mary, which must have cost her father a fortune. I have a confused recollection of a dinner, perhaps to a hundred guests, which flowed and sparkled to the rhythm of bootlegged hilarity. I recall a dance which followed at a fashionable hotel; a supper served at midnight, for which I had no appetite; two jazz bands which seemed to be torturing concealed pussies; a quite unnecessary breakfast, an-

nounced when the sensible world was snoring. My final and most lasting memory is of sand in my mouth and a head that felt enormous.

Under Mary's urgings, certain impressions become vivid.

"For a prohibition country there was too much alcohol," I venture.

"That was done to secure a stag-line." She tinkles her spoon against her saucer.

"If you want to know what I thought," her reserve goads me into frankness, "the entire show struck me as a pretentious waste of money."

"How we agree!" She nods.

"Why did you allow it?" I snap her up. "Your father couldn't afford it. He gave the idea that he was richer than he was."

"Then the party was a success."

"But what did he gain by it?"

"What did anybody gain?" she returns my question.

"Don't fence." I endeavor to pin her. "What did your father gain by creating a totally spurious impression of wealth?"

"Aren't you simple!" Her eyes twinkle. "Who would marry the daughter of a man who wasn't wealthy? But do struggle a bit harder to re-

member about me. It's so terrifically important."

"You were dressed,"—I beg her not to hurry me—"in a Venetian gown. Silver, wasn't it? I can see your little pointed chin, your heart-shaped face uplifted and lips parted, as though you were waiting for someone whom you half-expected. He didn't come; by morning you looked wilted and disappointed. Don't interrupt me; I'm remembering quite distinctly. I danced with you; you didn't heed me. You were like a person in a dream. 'Times have changed, little Mary, since days when I used to pick you out of your cradle.' Something of that sort I said. You were handed like a doll from partner to partner, always smiling, always expectant."

"Then you *did* notice." She seizes my hands. "I was watching for my Englishman—the one you called the knight-errant."

"So even at that early stage I had a rival!" I twit her. "The last I heard of him he had one hand on the wheel and his free arm about you. I judge from the swiftness of his tactics that he was susceptible."

"You're forgetting me," she corrects. "To make an embrace complete it takes two to be susceptible."

"Excuse me." I halt her while I fumble for my pad and pencil. "You're so delightfully naïve. There's no objection, I hope, to reporting you verbatim."

"Sorry to have misled you," she continues blandly. "The only word he spoke all the way to St. Jean was to say it was a damned shame and to call me a poor kiddy. He drove straight to my hotel. If Mummy had returned, this episode might have ended. But Mummy hadn't.

"I was so shaken—honestly I was—that I was frightened to be alone. I begged my Englishman to stay with me. He parked his car and suggested a stroll in the moonlight. I agreed, since it wasn't very romantic to sit in a dull lobby, chaperoned by a fish-eyed porter.

"My flimsy evening wrap cuddled about me, we wandered off till we reached a jetty, which juts out into the harbor. On its steps, against which the sea was rippling, we sat down. I must have told him an awful lot about myself. You know how these things happen—sacred moments; when you were younger, you, too, must have had them. He reciprocated. That yacht lying at anchor in the path of moonlight was his. The rowboat dragging its rope against the jetty was his also. He'd been in the war. He was a

homeless man. Nothing since the war had turned out satisfactorily. Then he whispered, 'Till now.'

"His arm about my waist tightened. He had noticed me, it seemed, the first day he had stepped ashore. He'd stayed because I'd attracted him. At that point my head sank against his shoulder. When he stooped his lips, I forgot about the boy in the fur coat. By the time I remembered, Mummy had been in the hotel an hour.

"You can imagine my meeting with her—or, perhaps, you can't. Her first question was whether the Brazilian had proposed.

" 'Such a surprise for dear Daddy,' she said excitedly, 'to bring you home the next best thing to married.'

"Foreseeing that I was about to disappoint her, I postponed confessing till the room was dark and we were separated by the space between our twin beds.

" 'But really, Mary, what a provoking idiot you are! There are ways of refusing a man without biting him. Besides, you must have been as much to blame as he was; this couldn't have happened unless you'd been forward.'

"I protested my backwardness; but Mummy wouldn't believe me.

" 'I'm deeply shocked, Mary. You must learn to control yourself. I don't feel that I can trust you. I hope you behaved more decorously with this English Don Quixote.'

"Guessing that already she was pinning her hopes on the Englishman, I pretended to be drowsy.

"Next morning I was up early. As I slipped into my bathing suit, I kept gazing across the blue sheet of water where his yacht was lying. He had understood me. He hadn't spoken a word of condemnation. My heart went out to him.

"Mummy was still asleep. No one in the hotel was stirring except the servants. The promenade was empty. On the beach the only figure in sight was an old woman putting up tents. Plunging into the sea, I began to swim out. I think my idea was to escape from hypocrisy. As I drew away from land and approached the yacht, the hope grew that he might signal to me."

"I suppose the poor blighter was still snoring in his cabin."

"It was a gorgeous morning," she ignores me. "The Pyrenees looked like a green wall, so close that by stretching out your hand you could touch them."

There was much more in this lyric vein; farm-

houses like nests; clouds like chariots; herself a mermaid.

"Let's take all that for granted," I interrupt impatiently. "Did you become exhausted, so that he had to rescue you a second time? If he did, did he behave as nicely as I would? Or did he pull up anchor and elope with you sans trousseau, sans wedding, clad in nothing but a one-piece bathing suit?"

"Truth is stranger than fiction." She makes great eyes at me. "I reached the yacht without mishap and paddled around for a while. No one came out to notice me. I began to feel cold. The distance was too far to swim back: I climbed the ladder. It was jolly and warm on deck. Not having had much sleep, I dozed. When I opened my eyes, a rug had been thrown over me and he was sitting beside me.

"Of course you're going to ask what he said. He accepted my being there perfectly naturally. He sent a sailorman to his cabin to fetch me a dressing gown and after that we breakfasted. It was awfully easy to talk to him, the way it's easy to talk in dreams. A dream was what it seemed —as though when I'd stepped into the sea, I'd swum clear away from reality. I told him why I'd escaped to him: because I'd found Mummy

out—that she was only interested in me to get me married. He asked me if I didn't want to be married. I shook my head. 'I'd much rather be here with you.' Then we played a game of imagining, how we sailed away, always visiting tropic islands. 'Too bad you weren't born sooner,' he teased me. 'I must be double your age. When you're mine, I'll be over fifty. When you're fifty, I'll be—— But why think about it? What I mean is we were fated to miss each other.'

" 'But we haven't,' I glowed on him.

"You'd have been fond of him, too, Uncle Biff. He was like you. He treated me with a sort of playful seriousness. He didn't make me ashamed of being inexperienced."

"How long did you stay with him, Mary?"

"All day. I'd never been so happy."

"And pray, what was your mother doing?"

"She'd gone to San Sebastian to attend a bull fight. We sent the sailor to the hotel to let her know where I was. She'd left a note for me, stating she might be late in her returning. By withdrawing the light of her countenance, she hoped she was punishing me. When we had rowed ashore and she was still absent, I dressed in my living best and we drove out to dinner in the country. The place he took me to was Ascain,

following the windings of the Nivelle. I could describe that drive——"

"Don't," I implore her. "You'd been picked up by a man whom you didn't know from Adam. You were seventeen; he was nearing forty. You'd consumed the entire day exposing your scarcely draped figure. Human nature being much the same the world over, at what point did he cease behaving nicely?"

"He didn't cease."

"Then what was the matter with him?"

"He happened to be a gentleman."

"If you'd said he happened to be a corpse, I'd understand you."

She peals with laughter and plunges the length of the couch to chastise me.

"How impossible you are to deceive! Doesn't it depend on one's definition of behaving nicely? I won't say he didn't kiss me. I won't say I didn't encourage him. We dined in an arbor, the stars peeping down. On our way home the Nivelle, whose wanderings you forbid me to describe, was a snake of silver moonlight. We had stopped the car while we embraced, to avoid driving dangerously, when he suggested, 'To-morrow you'll introduce me to your mother.'

" 'Not much,' I surprised him.

" 'Why not?' he inquired.

" 'Because she'd ask a lot of questions and do her best to make you marry me.'

"I didn't know what I'd done—only that I'd done it. Stepping on the gas, he raced me home in record time.

"At parting I accused him, 'You're angry.'

"He clutched me to him. 'With myself. With you—never.'

"I told Mummy a cock-and-bull story to account for my day. We went to bed almost reconciled.

"In the night I woke wondering why I'd warned him against Mummy. Suddenly I realized that I couldn't live without him. Not living without a man meant marrying him.

"Next morning I rose with the sun. Can't you see me, poor baby that I was in my white nightie? I tiptoed out onto the veranda and stifled a shriek. Why did I nearly shriek, Uncle Biff?"

"What's the use? You're telling the story."

"I shrieked because the yacht wasn't there.

" 'He isn't there.' I shook Mummy. Naturally she wasn't placid when roused from dreams by a demented daughter.

" 'If this gets known,' she scolded me, 'our reputations are mud. You bite a suitor for try-

ing to kiss you one night and the next day compromise yourself with another. There's nothing left for us but to pack and return to America.'

"And that's what we did, with a two weeks' stop-over in Paris to collect my coming-out dresses. A nice situation, wasn't it—Mummy fighting mad and me broken-hearted?"

"But what had you done to the fellow? Given him stage-fright?"

"That's what I asked myself. It wasn't till I'd been home a month that hs first letter, readdressed from the hotel, reached me. It was a long letter full of self-accusations; the main fact it conveyed was that he was already married."

"The sneaking scoundrel!" I exclaim.

"Not at all," she counters fiercely. "Why will you spoil everything by being so darned conventional? I don't care what my age was, I was as much to blame. His wife had gone back on him. She hadn't lived with him since the war, yet she refused to divorce him. I was still crazy over him. No doubt you think that's immoral. I wrote him and received replies. I was desperate. My family was preparing to bring me out, which meant marrying me to someone else. Ten days before my launching I cabled him. I promised

to run off with him if he'd come and fetch me."

She falls silent.

"Well, he didn't. That's obvious," I say to help her.

"No, he didn't," she smiles quietly. "But up to the very last minute—— That was why you caught the expression on my face of always expecting."

"You hoped he'd appear in the ballroom doorway?"

I press her hand. She draws away.

"No need to be sentimental. Everyone has to be a fool once. I thought you ought to know; it kind of explains me. That's all for to-night."

As the door is closing she pops her head out.

"So you see I was right in feeling that I was auctioned."

THE CHERUBIM AND MARY ANGEL

WE HAD emerged from the Hudson Tunnel and were speeding into the wintry fog which overspread the Jersey meadows, behind which coke furnaces and electric signs threw up a fantastic glare.

"That wasn't life, Uncle Biff."

Beneath the robe that covered our knees she slipped a cozening hand into mine. It was discreetly gloved. I glanced quickly at the chauffeur to assure myself that the angle of his mirror prevented him from spying.

"In a sense it was life." My tone was subdued as a conspirator's. "Life as we imagine it on Christmas Eve, when we prepare for a non-

existent Santa Claus to come down a chimney which is in fact a radiator."

Her fingers wriggled rebelliously.

"That's the first chapter in the great unwritten masterpiece entitled, *The Bunk My Mother Taught Me*. It's the earliest of the many whoppers that grown-ups feed to innocent mites. There isn't a Santa Claus and radiators don't have chimneys, so why stuff little minds with falsehoods and leave them to discover?"

"Because God made us inaccurate human beings and not cash registers," I chaffed her. "You powder your nose and use lipstick. Your idea is that you make yourself more beautiful. That's what imagination does; it plucks the eyebrows and rouges the cheeks of the commonplace. If decrepit beavers of my many years were to cut down dream-beanstalks before spry young Jacks had had a chance to clamber up them, all their days the spry young Jacks would go about moaning that the sky was nothing but clouds."

"The sky *is* nothing but clouds," she refuted me. "Besides, if one takes your sloppy fairy story at its face value, all Jack found when he'd climbed his dream-beanstalk was an ogre waiting to devour him. That's what the whole of my

generation has found. We're through with dream-beanstalks."

Too late I realized that my illustration had been unfortunate.

"Have it your own way," I became elderly. "Half the world's fun derives from self-deception. If men hadn't been capable of illusions, the North Pole would never have been discovered."

"And a fat lot of good that did anybody," she stymied me.

"Take the fiction"—I sneaked an unfair advantage—"that you and I are related. Prick the bubble and what are we?"

"But it wasn't life," she harked back to the musical comedy we had witnessed with its thwarted lovers, atrocious villains and triumphant wedding bells. "The older I grow the more I hate lies—especially the blackest lie that people who marry live happily forever after."

"Aren't you taking our afternoon's clowning too seriously?" I assumed an almost medical attitude.

"I am not. Think of all the beaux with their Janes who have gone home believing that that twaddle was prophetic. The same prophecy is howled at them over the radio, they dance to it,

read it in novels, hear it preached in sermons: 'Get married and heaven on earth will begin.' What tripe! You know it won't. I know it won't. Everybody knows it won't except those who haven't tried. What's the object of luring fresh imbeciles into the same trap, unless it's because we're spiteful?"

Nothing could be gained by continuing this grotesque conversation. So I chuckled, "You're forgetting that I'm a bachelor and therefore an imbecile." After which, having scored a point, I lapsed into silence.

I can often read Mary's mind most clearly when she says nothing. Her face turned from me, she sat staring with wistful envy at the honking scurry of the week-end crowd. Overtaking us as though the highway were a race-track and shooting into the distance till we could barely distinguish their tail-lights, streamed run-abouts overloaded with joy-infected maniacs. In the front seat, as a rule, a blown-about girl sprawled beside a raccoon-coated driver; in the rumble a second couple cuddled inextricably. For a brief moment we glimpsed their impassioned faces. Then they were lost in the gloom of the November night. Mary had forgotten me.

She was remembering romantic days when she, too, had been mauled and embraced.

Our jaunt, despite its auspicious beginning, was ending in failure. I had decided that what she required was to be lifted out of her environment. She had dolled herself up to do me proud at a Saturday matinée.

"Do you recognize it, Uncle Biff?" she had greeted me when I had called for her. "It was my going-away plumage."

Thus prompted, I had remembered the tailored costume and tight little hat in which a bare nine months ago I had watched her dash, like a freed bird, from her father's protection to set off on her honeymoon.

"What's the idea?" I had questioned.

"I put it on for you, Uncle Biff, because today's another day when I want so badly to be happy."

We had driven to New York in a mood of bubbling excitement. Wishing to be intensely modern, I had lunched her at a glorified speakeasy, taken her to the most popular show on Broadway, and even munched chocolates with her between the acts. I had done my best at over forty to be a college boy and had seemed

to be succeeding till, on the homeward journey, she had ruined everything by complaining that the play wasn't life.

Still holding my hand and deriving as much pleasure as from gripping an umbrella, she had awakened me to bleak facts. There wasn't a Santa Claus and I wasn't a college boy. I was her pretense uncle and she was a deserted wife.

She must have sensed the drop in temperature which her truth-telling had caused me, for she snuggled closer.

"I've been horrid, old darling, after you've tried to be so kind. When you bind up my wounds, I scratch."

"Then scratch if it relieves your feelings," I babied her. "I'm at your service."

"I sometimes think——" She broke off provocatively.

"I don't believe it."

"But I do," she assured me. "On those rare occasions it has occurred to me that you might have made a very useful husband."

"How's that?"

"You get such a kick out of escorting me."

"My dear child,"—I let go her hand—"I must be honest. The kick is caused not by you but by your resemblance to your mother. At your

age she used to accompany me to matinées, which was before your father cut me out."

"Well, we won't shed any tears over that," she dismissed my sentiment. "You'd have been divorced by now. Even then Mummy knew her onions; she chose a man who was docile."

That held me because it wounded.

But if Mary can demolish so brutally the false emotions of an older generation, why can't she curb her own follies?

We were passing in silence up the prosperous avenue in which her father has his house. As we drew level with her old domicile, she leaned forward.

"It isn't one bit altered. Mummy doesn't talk to me, so Daddy daren't. Bringing me to my senses, she calls such tactics. I should worry."

That she did worry became evident; the next moment she was crying.

"What have I done? I'm so lonely. Seeing people in love has reminded me."

I had intended to bid her good-bye without entering her apartment.

"These lily-white hands shall scramble you an egg. If you'll come up, I'll be divine," she tempted me.

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We had left the table for Louisa, the part-time colored maid, to clear on her arrival next morning. In the living room, with its three dark windows in line, pin-pointed with stars and crawled over by lights of distant automobiles, we were sipping coffee. Everything we employed had been a wedding gift: the cups from which we drank, the Persian rug beneath our feet, the cigarette box, the ash trays. In the silence of my brain I was carrying on an argument. Here was a nest to which everyone who had ever cared for Mary had contributed. No young couple could have started with brighter prospects.

Mary had seemed to be the bride of brides, ethereal and remote, yet ardent and glowing. I shall always remember the strange mixture of longing and innocence with which she lifted her heart-shaped face to the bridegroom's as she left the altar, and the tenderness with which he stooped. Girls marry, I am aware, for a thousand reasons other than love, stretching all the way in baseness from ambition to the gaining of a meal-ticket. Mary Angel could have had any one of a dozen suitors. She still could, were they certain that the bridegroom's shoes were vacant. But are they?

Not to create a mystery, here is the total of

my information. In the spring of the year, before sailing to Europe, my last act was to attend Mary's nuptials. When I returned toward the end of October I was greeted by the scandal that Mary and her husband had separated. I paid a visit to her parents; when her name was mentioned they betrayed embarrassment and veered off to a safer topic. When I called on Mary she grinned at me with the defiance of a naughty child.

"So you've come to nose out why Jeff and I have busted?"

"That isn't my purpose," I told her. "I hoped you could use me."

I've had a weak spot for Mary from the moment I first saw her in her cradle. Nothing that she's done or may do could alienate me. Since this is an age when no one believes in pure motives, my frequent visits may lead to my being quoted as corespondent. I can't help that; my fear is that without companionship she may attempt something desperate. As a grass-widow she's ostracized. My sex are afraid to approach her lest they become compromised; her own are condemning and self-righteous. Her parents' neglect of her has given color to the surmise that she's the guilty party. It's whispered that a

young husband of so few months' standing must have discovered something dreadful to walk out on her so finally. All the times she was rumored to have been engaged are recounted, all the boys she played up and then discarded. She was wild—that's the verdict.

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"We'd got as far as your coming-out party."

"My auctioning," she corrects me.

"Overstatements of that sort don't win sympathy." I clear my throat judicially. "A coming-out party is the conventional way of introducing a young girl to society."

"How you twist facts!" She pokes the tip of her tongue at me. "It's a way of announcing that her parents are willing to accept bids for ridding their hands of her."

"Rubbish!" I make an effort to restrain my impatience. "There comes a time in every girl's life when she's ripe for courtship. If her parents locked her up she would smuggle notes to men by servants. By hook or by crook, for better or for worse she's got to experience passion. If her parents have her interests at heart, they set the stage for her and give her philanderings a decorous appearance. As a rule they're anything

but decorous. It's the polite pretense that men make the advances. I'm a man; I know they don't. From start to finish woman is the huntress."

"I'm not denying that." A predatory hand steals out to pacify me.

"Your purpose so far"—I face her—"has been to lay the follies of your generation at the door of mine. If I thought you were sufficiently just not to be offended, I'd like to present you with a few facts."

"Of course unpleasant," she grimaces.

"My generation, which is your parents', never floundered into half the messes in which yours bemires itself. We didn't throw up the sponge the moment marriage proved not to be a bed of roses. If we mucked our lives we had the decency to keep the catastrophe private. And there's another thing we didn't do—I mean our women didn't: when they'd placed a wedding ring on their finger, they didn't rove about with a questing eye."

"What you're telling me," she interpolates suavely, "is that I'm promiscuously inclined. You're thinking of what happened this afternoon."

"That partly." I accept her challenge. "It

seems to me that young girls of to-day lack the ability to discriminate. When they select a husband, almost any pair of pants will serve their purpose. They've sampled embraces from so many sources that they've ceased to be fastidious. Suddenly they wake up to the knowledge that the rolling stone gathers no moss—moss being a man who belongs to them exclusively. They become panic-stricken at the prospect of eternal spinsterhood, with the result that they grab at a makeshift, nothing like as eligible as half the suitors they've rejected. They pledge their vows at the altar with mental reservations. 'Till death us do part' is a figure of speech, meaning till to-morrow or the day after in their interpretation of the contract. They set out on their honeymoon fully determined, if their escort doesn't come up to scratch, to swop him for another. They're one flesh only for as long as things run smoothly."

"You're talking about me." She eyes me coldly.

"My dear child," I half-apologize, "how can we write your autobiography without discussing you? You're a married woman, yet seeing flappers necking with boys in runabouts makes you envious. You've no right to be envious when

you've promised to focus your affection on one man forever."

"Uncle Biff, I could slap you. You ought to wear mittens. You're the most unmodern person. My self-respect demands that I should see myself desired. It's the reason I don't go about with holes in my stockings. My mother trained me for one solitary purpose: to kindle desire. I owe a right to myself, which is the right to be self-expressive. I yearn to rouse men to longing; if I didn't own it, I'd be lying."

"A thief expresses himself," I mumble; "he goes to jail if he's caught."

"Then he squares accounts with the world. He accepts the odds and loses."

We stare at each other. I'm the one who breaks the silence.

"Isn't the fun of loving vastly over-rated? To be made untidy and petted by someone to whom you're only a symbol can't be very gratifying. Is flirtation, which commits nobody to anything, worth the trouble?"

"Enormously," she declares shamelessly. "Besides, it isn't a case of whether flirtation is worth the trouble. It's like speeding. You tread on the gas without a thought of accidents. It isn't worth the trouble, in order to travel a few miles

faster, to be tossed in a ditch with a broken neck. But when you're young, whatever you want at the moment's worth the trouble. That's what being young means; you can't help yourself."

"Being young!" I seize her words. "According to you youth's a disease for which you're not responsible. When you're held accountable for your actions, 'We're young,' you say and think that your seniors, whom you regard as the lowest things that crawl, should feel privileged to foot the damage. To hear you talk one might suppose that no one had ever been young before you."

"Not at all," she smiles slyly. "Heaps of people past forty are as young as I am in spirit. Take yourself, Uncle Biff; you wouldn't be showing all this interest if I were cockeyed and a hundred."

"You've not answered my question." By displaying sternness I retain my dignity. "If matrimony is a flop, why envy people who are going through all the motions that lead up to it?"

"Because"—she hesitates and gains time by lighting a cigarette—"the motives that actuate a grass-widow or a beau-less maid are the same as those that persuaded poor Eliza to cross the ice. The bloodhounds of loneliness are behind her. Her side of the river isn't promising; the

opposite bank isn't promising, either, but it may be an improvement. Taking her happiness in her hands, she leaps to a block of ice, after which she continues hopping from block to block, urged on by the instinct for self-preservation. The drifting blocks in the case of a beau-less maid are boys. The more they sink under her, the faster she hops. *Voilà!*"

I hold up my hand with the omnipotent gesture of a cop arresting traffic.

"You've already stated your opinion of matrimony—that it's a trap for imbeciles. You and I are collaborating. If this account of your exploits isn't to degenerate into an hysterical squawk, it's up to me to see that you are logical. If your illustration of unmated females crossing the ice isn't sheer nonsense, it means that the Beulah Land on the farther shore is matrimony. Why strive to reach a worse hell than the one from which you're escaping?"

"Gentle Unkie,"—she flirts her fingers over my bald spot—"it must be awfully difficult for you to get my angle. Your brand of lunacy has been to chuck your power to love away for the sake of a vain woman who was too big a fool to appreciate you."

"I'm shocked that you should refer to your mother as a vain woman."

"You darling thing!" She melts all over me. "It's simply dear of you to be shocked. All your theories of life are so crooked."

"Then here's your chance to straighten them." I speak crossly. "Criticizing gets the world nowhere. If you uproot and don't replant, you make a desert. Be constructive."

"I will." She glints at me mischievously. "Marriage as people of your age have managed it is disgustingly mercenary. Girls ought not to be forced to catch a boy, whether they want him or not, in order to spare their parents' bank account."

"I don't agree with your implied assertion; but how to avoid it?"

"Girls ought to be brought up like men, expecting to gain their own livings and to be independent."

"So that after they've become wives they may still gain their own livings. Is that the goal at which you're driving?"

"It would be heaps more respectable." She nods.

"Then who would run the home and have

the babies? Or would you sit on a perch and do without babies?"

"Goodness knows! Husbands couldn't have the babies, that's certain. Since the spread of apartment houses, babies in wholesale quantities are going out of fashion. One has to keep pace with the times."

"Keeping pace with the times, if I interpret you aright, means race suicide."

She hypnotizes me with a glance. Before she speaks I know she has cornered me.

"Now then, Unkie, as a bachelor, that's one greenhouse at which you're not permitted to fling stones. The important thing in marriage is to make a proper start. Later one's bound to run on the rocks. So why sooner? The first quarrels in married life have to do with money. They could be postponed, at any rate, if the wife were self-supporting. Let's begin our reforms with a wage-earning wife. How does that strike you?" The absence of applause irritates her. "No system could be more putrid than the present one," she finishes glumly.

I assume a pontifical air. I realize now that it was unwarranted in the light of her later confessions.

"The trouble with you young people"—I wag a finger at her—"is that you start your reforms at the wrong end. You can't reform nature. Nature insists on your having babies. Nature insists on your marrying. Nature's endowed you with the passion to be creative. And here's another fact worthy of your attention: nature's centuries older than we are."

"Darling, this is all news to me."

"Whether it is news to you or not,"—I grow a trifle hot—"the kind of marriage you propose is no loftier than free love. A sterile wife who's financially independent is no better than a mistress."

"How do you mean no better?" she asks.

"Free love's an experiment." I explain. "Because it's free, there's nothing binding. At the first difference of opinion, either party walks. The duration of common liking is the period set for faithfulness. Directly one of the contracting parties acquires a taste for some new person——"

"Jumping Jerusalem!" she attempts to halt me. "Who's being cynical?"

"And then what becomes of the other contracting party?" I persist. "If there are babies, what becomes of them? They go to a state insti-

tution, I suppose, the way they do in Russia, to be dehumanized."

"Stop." She kicks my shin with her pointed slipper. "What cheek it is of you to think you can instruct me! I'm married; you're only a bachelor. I'm infinitely better informed how men and women grow to hate each other and yet can't do without each other. That's the bungle."

"Then why blame your bringing up, which means my generation, for a bungle which dates back to Eden?"

"I don't entirely. I blame my parents for throwing all the blame on me. They ought to have told me that life was a bungle. They didn't. They never educated me in any way to protect myself. All the girls of my class are being educated exactly as I was, to attract men that they may marry them, quite regardless of whether they have any aptitude for marriage."

"Which brings us back to your coming-out party." I suggest. "Thank heavens we're back. It's been a long wander."

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"So at last you're going to be a sensible collaborator"—she jogs my ribs with her elbow—"and

let me tell my story in my own artless fashion. It's my turn to insist on your being logical. If you don't approve of me, you mustn't approve of Mummy, because I'm what she made me. I was a blank sheet of paper till she took to scribbling on me. Till she had snatched me from the convent to plunge me into the worldliness of St. Jean de Luz, my soul was as innocent as an angel's. Lest you've forgotten your Bible, let me remind you that no distinction is made in heaven between boy angels and girl angels. They're all sexless; a little like you, Uncle Biff—guileless, cherubic bachelors.

"Anyway, until my experiences at St. Jean I'd been gullible as a silly goldfish. I'd gobbled without examining all the copy-book maxims which had been fed me, 'Life is real. Life is earnest'—balderdash of that sort. Having my affections stolen by a man who turned out to be married had taught me just how real life was.

"Mummy didn't let up on me. I'd given her a scare and cut short her holiday. Our transatlantic voyage homeward was one continuous lecture. Girls who permitted themselves to be picked up by strangers, especially strangers who hadn't been introduced to their mamas, were almost certain to end badly.

"That was Mummy all over. When she'd pulled a bloomer, the fault was mine. If picking up strangers was disgraceful, she'd been picking them up all summer. I'd only followed her example. Of course I can read now what was worrying her: she was afraid that after such a sickener, when I became a débutante I might not try to attract boys. If I couldn't make the opposite sex swarm after me like bees after honey, I would gain the reputation for being unpopular. If that happened, she convinced me, I might as well never have been born.

"You noticed the success of her coaching at my coming-out ball. I did my darnedest to appear obliging, passing from one perspiring dance partner to another with the fixed smile of a complaisant doll. Already she'd thrown the terror into me that I would never get married."

"Tell me, Mary Angel," I divert her from the sore topic, "what did it feel like after having been treated as a little girl to find yourself suddenly considered a young lady?"

"Horrid." She pulls a face at me. "It was the first time I had been privileged to witness the spectacle of my elders getting drunk in public. They were getting drunk in my honor on liquor supplied by my parents. Naturally I'm hard-

ened to such sights now—not anything like as censorious. I rather expect fathers of families who are inclining to stoutness to get a trifle fuddled when the chance offers. I've learned that since prohibition the word drunkard has gone out of fashion; you only find it used in Victorian novels. No one gets drunk nowadays; they get merry. But you're asking how it felt to be included for the first time in such orgies. I could scarcely believe my eyes when, as the evening wore on, I noticed the transformations that were taking place all over the ballroom. I'd believed that all my seniors were saints beyond criticism because they'd been so very rigid over scrutinizing my morals. And here they were, married men and women, ogling one another, making risqué remarks and shrieking like Poll-parrots."

"The same as those young people in run-abouts," I interpolate, slyly.

"And without their excuse," she snaps me up, "for they weren't young and they had no right to be passionate. My worst shock was Mummy; she was the vamp of the party. I was becoming disgusted. Hypocrisy grinned at me from every corner. And then I met Alec."

"Which Alec?" I inquire. "There have been so many."

"The first, of course. I didn't know him from Adam; he appealed to me because he was sober. An intoxicated judge, who passes sentence on wayward girls, was tickling my ribs and complaining that his wife still wore corsets, when I collared Alec's eye and signaled to him to rescue me.

" 'Sorry,' I apologized. 'The judge fancied he was a sheik and that I was a ukulele, or whatever they play in the desert.'

" 'The party's getting rough. They always do toward morning,' Alec enlightened me.

" 'I should say it's got.' I glanced down at my trampled feet to make sure they weren't bleeding.

" 'I wish I were in bed,' he yawned.

" 'Then why aren't you?'

" 'I was waiting to claim a dance with you.

" 'Go to bed,' I advised. 'Your poor eyes are hanging on your cheeks.'

" 'I will,' he agreed, 'if you'll promise to let me call on you.'

"When I'd promised, he left me. I danced on and on. Alec is my one sane memory of that nightmare.

"Next morning I didn't wake till lunch-time. Mummy was sitting on my bed.

" 'Dearest, you were a riot—quite too adorable.'

" 'Where's Daddy?' I questioned.

" 'Gone to business. Why shouldn't he, when so many expensive things have to be paid for?'

"A sermon followed on how much my coming-out had cost. I could have replied that a good deal of the cost had been wasted on intoxicating people who probably wished by now that they hadn't been intoxicated. I was anxious, however, to appear grateful.

"Mummy fell to discussing eligible males and giving me tips as to which were most worthy of attention. The chief recommendation appeared to be the size of their fathers' bank accounts and after that their ability to introduce me to New York society. She didn't say it, but she implied that men were inferior creatures to be employed as stepping-stones to higher things and then kicked from under you. When I informed her that Alec had a date with me, she was disappointed, not because Alec wasn't a perfectly honorable person, but because, 'He's a nobody, darling—just a good-looking, well-dressed dummy to stand in a stag-line.'

"I won't pretend, Uncle Biff, to give you a verbatim report of my conversation with Alec that evening. All the latter part of the afternoon the telephone had been ringing and young men had been trying to make appointments with me. Mummy had become increasingly annoyed that I'd booked myself up. However, she played the game by clearing Daddy out of the library so that I might not be embarrassed by a spectator.

" 'For heaven's sake, don't gum yourself the way you did at St. Jean,' she cautioned. 'To keep men in their place you must keep them hoping.'

"Alec and I sat side by side on a couch as harmlessly as you and I are sitting at present. If Mummy thought we were throwing gasoline on love's bonfire, she was mistaken. Half the time, if you only knew it, when youth's supposed to be flaming, it's conducting gloomy post-mortems on the sins of your generation. That was what we were doing.

"Alec was so awfully sympathetic and it was so long since I'd compared notes with anyone of my own age that I went the limit. I told him how I'd lost my heart to the Englishman whom I'd since discovered was married. I told him how

Mummy had blamed me and asked him whether he considered me blameworthy.

" 'It was tough luck. Of course not.'

"From that we got to analyzing the events of the previous night. I couldn't see what I'd gained by being brought out and said so.

" 'You've gained nothing.' He held my paw as spiritually as if we had been a pair of cherubim. 'Until you're scrapped as out-of-date or married, which is the same thing, you're in for a more exhausting round of dissipation than any Broadway chorus girl. Gee, but I pity you!'

" 'Alec,'—I saw a gleam of hope—'how long till I get scrapped as out-of-date?'

" 'It partly depends on you, Mary, and how long you can stand the racket. Some girls get scrapped at the end of their first season. Débutantes are like automobiles; each new crop has distinguishing paint jobs and improved lines. A girl who belongs to a model a bit ahead of the fashion may remain snappy for two years.'

" 'And after that, Alec?'

" 'Among her old pals she's regarded as still serviceable.'

" 'But for how long, Alec?'

" 'For a third season. In her fourth, like a creaking actress she begins to give farewell per-

formances and goes on tour till empty houses hint that she should retire.'

"Here was honest advice—not prejudiced stuff like Mummy's. It was an opportunity to be exploited.

" 'I don't intend to marry, Alec, because as I've told you my heart is broken. At the same time I couldn't bear to retire. What must I do to be considered snappy?'

" 'I hate to tell you, Mary; you're such an unspoiled kid.'

" 'But do,' I urged.

" 'The most successful line is to short-change your customers in private, but in public to act liberal as a free-lunch counter. Seem to be game to take all hurdles, but at the last moment avoid 'em. Never say *no* to an invitation; though you're dying on your feet, pretend to be ecstatic. However fresh a guy gets, don't show that you resent it; if you do, he'll spread the good word that you were the bad actor. Never consult your watch, especially after midnight, or you'll gain the reputation for being a prune and a kill-joy. Four nights in the week you must be wandering the streets at an hour when high-class burglars are snug in their little cots. The other three nights, you will chase your family out of sight

and devote to try-outs. A try-out is the kind of session we're conducting: you're dressed to the nines, a new boy on the couch, shaded lamps, curtained windows, absolute privacy. Half your boy-friends will be gumdrops. Don't let that discourage you. Sit them out. Hide their coats and hats till they've proposed to you. When they have, pretend that that wasn't what you'd intended. Be grateful to them. Mother them. Let them nibble, but keep them starving. As soon as they get outside your door they'll really start to love you because you let them off.'

" 'But what's the sense?' I gasped.

" 'It's sheer craziness.' He grinned. 'These are a few pages torn at random from *A Débutante's Guide to Etiquette*. Boiled down they amount to: to thine own self be false and it shall follow, as the night the day, then canst thou not be true to any man.' "

Mary squints at me as she smooths her bobbed hair. Unable to control myself I burst out: "The fellow was either spoofing you or he was an ass."

"Wrong again, Uncle. How frequently wrong you are! His every word was a prophecy. Take what he said about looking liberal as a free-lunch counter. Haven't you noticed the discon-

certing trick I have of purring against you or any man?"

"I certainly have." I jerk away from her. "I would never have mentioned it, unless you—— It's most embarrassing. Liable to be misunderstood."

"It's meant to be misunderstood." Fondling me with her eyes, she withdraws, leaving a gap. "I've been trained to make promises I can't and won't fulfill. I haven't been married long enough to recapture my lost sincerity."

"I wish you were modest as you used to be." I speak earnestly.

She sighs profoundly.

"I was born modest. Unfortunately there were people in the world ahead of me; they set me a bad example. Come to think of it Eve was the only girl who hadn't any parents; even she went wrong. But where were we? I was receiving pointers on how to navigate the social whirlpool. If I could remember all the wisdom Alec whispered to me, I'd certainly broaden your outlook. I can only give you snips and snaps. He assured me that my generation wasn't responsible for the dangers that strewed its path. That was pretty obvious, since we hadn't guessed they

existed till we were about to be ruined by them. The social whirlpool, according to Alec, was the invention of ambitious mamas."

"That horse is dead. Can't you stop flogging it?"

"Not even for you, Uncle Biff. We're conducting a crusade against the abuse of matrimony. The social whirlpool wouldn't exist if there weren't daughters to get married. Here's the proof of it: Who ever heard of a coming-out party given for a boy? All the rottenness of which my generation is accused, and for which your generation is actually responsible, is caused by panic-stricken mamas with little schoolgirls to market. What chance would we have to be rotten if we weren't over-entertained, supplied with automobiles, hip-flasks, and too much pocket money?"

"So you trace your wildness to parents' mistaken kindness?"

"I do not. It isn't kindness, mistaken or otherwise. It isn't even meant to be kindness. Alec traced our wildness to our parents' worship of money. He said that they hadn't anything else to give us, so they gave us money in gobs. To see their children flinging away with both hands what they themselves had saved made them feel

that they belonged to the aristocracy. He was really awfully clever; you've got to listen to what he told me, whether you agree with it or not. Women, when they'd passed thirty, he said, nearly all degenerated into snobs. Men weren't naturally dollar hounds; their wives' extravagances drove them to earn more and more, till at last the pursuit of wealth became their only passion. You get the idea, Uncle Biff: the women gambling at bridge, running to theaters, decking themselves with Queen of Sheba plumage, scampering to Europe; the men thankful to be allowed to drudge, since their homes meant nothing to them. The possession of a marriageable daughter provided women of forty with a new excuse for squandering. Hence the vulgar display which launched me.

" 'Mummy says my coming-out party entailed a terrific sacrifice,' I attempted a defense to Alec.

" 'Don't you believe her, kiddo,' he warned me. 'Mothers always pretend that whatever they do is sacrificial.'

"Then he tore their pretense wide open. Even you, Uncle Biff, will have to acknowledge the truth of his criticisms. This social nonsense played ducks and drakes with a boy's career at

college and made him worthless to his employers after he'd entered business. It gave him a false sense of his own importance and burnt up his energies. For a girl it was even worse. It taught her to cash in on her good looks and to focus on nothing but winning masculine attention. After a season or two she became as physically selfish and as mentally immoral as a courtesan."

"I'm sure he never said that," I expostulate.

"Perhaps he didn't in those words," she concedes. "I'm abbreviating for you. The fact remains that when two babes-in-the-wood wed with frazzled nerves stimulated by alcohol, you can't expect much in the way of tolerance. I gave our conversation a new slant by asking Alec what constituted society. He treated my question as a joke and coughed up the wisest answers."

"Probably he blackguarded your parents still further while sharing their hospitality."

"What a cute little guesser you are, Uncle Biff. Alec wasn't the sort you could gag with hospitality. Society in a democracy, according to him, was a fungus growth. Years ago, when the Four Hundred were first discovered, a neat little guillotine erected in Washington Square could have cured the abnormality. Now every

sniveling little burg had its assembly ball and list of socially elect. The fun of being on the list was that you could keep your neighbors off—make them uncomfortable by high-hatting them. But the price of high-hatting was that you got high-hatted in your turn, for the eligibles of Lancaster were the negligibles of Cleveland and the eligibles of Cleveland the negligibles of Baltimore. The inventors of this amiable sport were matrons who in their youth had been so unfortunate as to give birth to daughters."

"What was Alec's game?" I halt her. "He must have had some object."

I sense at once that I have scored a bull's-eye.

"He wanted to rescue me before I'd become a sophisticated ruin."

"How rescue you?"

"Uncle Biff, you do try my patience. By marrying me, of course. I followed his advice, allowed him to nibble and left him hoping."

"So that was your first proposal, Mary Angel? You were a fast worker. It begins to look to me as though the faults you attribute to others were the results of your own temperament. The more you tell me about yourself, the more you acquit your mother. I've been thinking, while I've listened, that you're a good deal of a ventriloquist:

Alec's lips appear to move, but the arguments that issue from them are yours."

"Think what you like." She tosses her head haughtily. "At any rate I'm not camouflaging. It was past two in the morning when Alec departed. I had supposed that the house was sleeping. Having turned out the hall lights, I was tiptoeing up the stairs when I spotted Daddy, looking crumpled and waiting for me in his dressing gown. I was afraid he was going to be angry, but he put his arm about me.

" 'I wasn't eavesdropping, little girl. I'm forbidden by your mother to be wise for you. But be careful. You're the only little girl I have. However late you return, you'll always find me sitting up for you.'

"And I always did, Uncle Biff, even to the night before my wedding. I hate to think how I copied Mummy in using him as a door-mat. He's getting some sleep at last, poor darling. No wonder he considers me a pest."

"You've made two false statements in almost the same breath." I betray irritation. "In the first place, your mother isn't the woman to use her husband as a door-mat; in the second, your father doesn't consider you a pest."

"Rot, Uncle Biff." She flames at me. "Face

facts. What has Daddy ever got out of marriage but the right to settle his wife's debts? Between me and Mummy he's led the life of a dog."

"My dear child," I assume a reasoning tone, "American men are noted for their chivalry."

"The pathetic, impotent boobs!" She leaps to her feet, turning her back on me, and gazes into the darkness from the window. "If you want to know what American husbands are, they're a laughing-stock. They're afraid of their wives and they bankrupt themselves for their princess daughters. American daddies are so unselfish that little beasts, like myself, aren't worthy to clean their shoes."

She swings round, emotionally, adorably.

"Thank God, American boys aren't copying their fathers. They know girls are cheats and see through them. When they've been swindled in their marriages, they cut their losses to save their souls. That's what Jeff did. Don't you dare to blame him."

"My dear child, the hour is growing late. I've done nothing that you should storm at me. Jeff's name was dragged into the conversation by you."

Feeling hurt and indignant, I go in search of my coat and hat. Having called good-night to

her from the passage, I am on the point of departing when she joins me.

"I haven't been as divine as I intended and promised."

"You've been anything but divine, Mary Angel."

"But you won't let my rudeness prevent you from visiting me?"

"Next time I'd much rather play hide-and-seek, as in the old days, than collaborate with you," I attempt a feeble joke.

"You were awfully fond of me once, Uncle Biff. I must have been a decent little kid then. But wrap your muffler round your throat. No, not like that. Let me do it."

Without my letting, she does it, putting the finishing touch to her repentance by tiptoeing against me and kissing me on the nose.

"About Jeff, Uncle Biff—I wasn't educated to be a wife. That was the trouble. Don't judge him harshly."

"I have no grounds for judging," I remind her.

She accompanies me along the corridor to the elevator.

"If you'll forgive me and come again," she promises, "I'll explain everything."

As I pass from the overheated apartment

house into the dim avenue, I am still puzzling over this Mary who can be so bitter and yet so magnanimous. For myself I can't pardon any man, whatever his generation, who deserts a woman. Drawing level with her old home I notice that automobiles are parked before it. A dinner followed by bridge is evidently in progress. There's another problem in human motives. How can parents even pretend to be happy, when the child whom they nursed through sicknesses and guarded—— But what does one gain by questioning motives?

• • •

Mary and her problems are troubling my conscience. Against my will I am beginning to view my generation through her young eyes. So next morning, being Sunday, I cancel an engagement to play golf and take myself off to church. My hope is that I shall be assured from the pulpit that this age has attained the highest recorded peak of compassion and justice.

Pews are sprinkled with women when I arrive. Men are conspicuous by their absence. The women fall into two categories: matrons, deputizing for their families, and old maids. Mary's mother is there ahead of me. How often have I

entered this sacred building solely to worship her! She wears miraculously—I believe that's the phrase. She hasn't changed much since days when I hoped she would accept me. Her profile is still clear and girlish. Her hair is golden, her figure slight. I'm not alone in subscribing to the illusion of youth which she creates, for she is universally referred to as the beautiful Mrs. Angel. I relive the past for a moment. Once she was Lilian to me, the embodiment of every perfection. But why do I saw *was?* Were she a widow to-morrow, you would find me on her door-step. And yet I can't help wondering what opinion God holds of her and, scarcely less interesting, what opinion she holds of herself. If I'd given my child the go-by, I fancy I would steer clear of divine service. She sits there meek and lovely, fashionably attired, giving a rendering of a worldly saint.

Strange! While Mary is with me, she rouses my combativeness; when she's absent I tend to side with her. During the singing of the hymns and reading of the lessons I recall our gawky conversations and meditate on her inconsistencies. Then it's the inconsistency of the world in general that absorbs me. Since Lilian is a Presbyterian, why did she educate her daughter at a

convent? The poor child wanted to be a nun. She was torn from her pious cloisters, dedicated to the flesh, and married as a Protestant from this very church.

I glance round at the smug appearance of the congregation—beefy, well-fed, unimaginative. One might suppose that every worshiper had been presented with a pass to heaven. But how would they kill time if they got there? No cocktails. No bridge clubs. Not a chance of making money by a flutter on the Stock Exchange, nor of spending it on personal decoration if gained. All angels dress alike; their white robes last forever. Mary's ranting against hypocrisy seems less exaggerated this morning.

The sermon begins. It's a sugar-coated discourse for the deserving. Late-comers are slipping into back pews. It's easy to guess what has detained them—too much self-indulgence last night. The sermon contains not one word against gluttony. Mary would say that the late-comers' attendance is eye-wash—an attempt to make themselves appear respectable.

Scarcely any young people are present. They're too keen on this life to feel the need of the next; besides, there's nothing in the service to attract them. Boys and girls who have made

their bow to society are probably sleeping, harboring their strength for the next bout of dissipation.

Illumined by Mary's revelations, the vision rises before me of a Godless world. Despite what the preacher may say, we live for our appetites as though we were no higher than the beasts that perish. What are the rest of the congregation thinking? About their golf scores and dressmakers' bills—about anything and everything but heaven. Well might Mary tell me, "I was never educated to be a wife." Yet it was in this building, fragrant with flowers, she was informed that God Himself was blessing her union.

The cant of professing a religion which we make no attempt to practise chokes me. I am able to think of nothing but a pretty child, a succulent morsel for gossip, sitting alone in proud defiance. If these singers of hymns were Christians, the preacher would announce, "We will now adjourn to Mary Angel's apartment. She's been abandoned by her husband. We failed to do our duty by her. She needs our comfort."

I grope for my hat. I'm adjourning, leaving the minister to drone on and repeat himself.

Between closed shops I stride uptown. I'm becoming as unjust as Mary in my wholesale

condemning. Reaching the avenue in which she dwells, between her parents' house and her apartment I meet her father.

He greets me with forced heartiness. "Hulloa, Biff, old man, you're just in time. Step in for a cocktail."

"Impossible."

"But do. You can't cold-shoulder me. I haven't spoken to you for ages."

"Any more than you've spoken to your daughter," I retort maliciously.

I'm admitted to her apartment by Louisa, the colored maid, and immediately become suspicious. There's a smell of pipe-tobacco.

"With you in a second. I'm getting up," she calls from her bedroom.

So she's not even dressed! That makes matters worse. I've caught her red-handed. By her code, whatever she does is her legitimate form of self-expression. But if she insists on affronting the conventions, why should I break lances in her defense? Without intending to play the spy, I examine an ash tray. Someone within a few minutes of my entrance has knocked out the contents of a pipe.

Aware that time must be hanging on my hands, Mary shouts remarks. She's in high spirits

and keeps me informed as to the progress she is making.

"Now my stockings."

I occupy myself by studying the view from her windows. The hill falls away into a deep valley, crowded with obscure dwellings. Scarcely a plume of smoke is rising. Factories have ceased to breathe. The atmosphere is as clear and sparkling as in the country. Far away skyscrapers of New York prick the horizon valiantly as a distant army advancing.

"A dab of powder on my nose, you poor old thing, and your penance is ended."

She comes humming into the room, gay and virginal. Virginal is not an appropriate adjective; but that is how she strikes me.

"See how I've snaked up for you." She slips an arm through mine.

She insists that I stay to lunch. During the meal she prattles about non-essentials. Not till Louisa has vanished to join an ebony admirer at a street corner does she become serious.

"You were offended by the dirty cracks I made last night. You thought I was too hard on Mummy. I wasn't hard on her as my mummy, but as a type. Things being as they are, she could scarcely help herself."

"That's the saner attitude," I congratulate her. "And things being as they are, you could scarcely help yourself either. Nevertheless, you were a tremendous trial to your parents."

"I was a more tremendous trial to myself. Can you imagine the emptiness of my existence, being forced to act as though I were boy-mad, when I wasn't? A girl has to appear to be boy-mad if she hopes to be popular. If she isn't popular, she might as well be in her grave."

I have no answer prepared. It's my secret conviction, since my latest discovery, that she's still boy-mad. What was that fellow doing in her apartment?

"Before I continue my autobiography,"—she assumes the self-conscious air of a budding authoress—"I have two ideas that might be useful. Here's the first: that a little marriage is a dangerous thing."

"And what do you mean by that?"

"I thought it was a rather smart observation," she smiles. "It accounts for the Reno habit. One shouldn't marry at all or should marry several times. But let the idea go; I see you don't approve of it."

"What's the second?"

"The second is a play upon words. This apart-

ment house is named Mildred Mansions. Jeff and I used to call it Mildewed Mansions. The part of the avenue where Daddy resides is sacred to inhabitants who can afford chauffeurs and ladies' maids. Our part descends to a lower level. The drop is so sudden as to be appalling. We thought Mildewed Mansions a joke."

"I'll make a note of it."

"Then the ground is clear to push forward with my autobiography. I'll deal first with the effect my coming-out had on my character; afterwards I'll give you a rapid sketch of my adventures with the cherubim.

"The effect of my coming-out was utterly corrupting. Six months before, I'd been a kid at a convent whose opinions hadn't counted. All of a sudden, by virtue of becoming a débutante, everything I wore and every party I attended was chronicled in the social columns—sometimes even in the New York papers. I and the Prince of Wales seemed to be running neck to neck. I occupied far more space than artists or philanthropists. Mummy was raised to the seventh heaven. I was mentioned as the charming, the winsome, the every other flatteringly adjectived daughter of Mr. and Mrs. Harry Angel. The praise went to my head. I began to believe that I

was the cat's pajamas. I didn't know, and nobody told me, that the same line was being handed by the local press to every other halfway pretty débutante in the United States. I became so inflated, Mummy helping me, that I really thought I was putting my family in the shade and that they ought to be grateful. Silly of me, wasn't it?"

"But the cherubim, as you call your suitors—what about them?"

"I'm coming to them; but there's a point I want to clear up. Everyone impressed on me (I can't say who—it was in the air) that youth is fleeting. That because it's fleeting, it's more precious than attainments. I mustn't waste a second on men too old or on men already married. That was why when you asked me to dance, I always accepted with reluctance."

"I used to notice that," I acknowledged ruefully.

"Well, that was the reason," she nods brightly. "I wasn't heartless. I didn't like you any the less. I was a person running to catch a train. The train was a young man, handsome and rich enough to be considered desirable. If you had hunted, as I have, you'd know that there aren't enough of them to go round. Every débutante

has to be loved, so I grabbed at makeshifts to keep my hand in."

"They were the cherubim at whom you grabbed, I presume. If the question isn't too personal, what was their attitude to you? Were they fussers and flirts—or were their intentions gravely honorable?"

Her eyes sparkle. They forewarn me that she is about to shock me.

"As honorable as could be expected. Some of them were dollar-hounds who believed that Daddy could endow them with a fortune, which was an impression Mummy did her best to exaggerate. You blink skeptically, you innocent old darling. Take it from me, love in a cottage is out of date. The modern lover, before he allows himself to love, has girls card-catalogued according to their possessions. College boys are financiers and hand one another tips: 'Pretty nothing! Steer clear of her. You'll have to support her family.' You can't blame them. From their cradles they've heard money rated above virtue. They've been automobiled, wined, given a place on the stag-line simply because they're an extra pair of pants. We girls have taught them not to respect us. Since the world began girls have married for money. Now that women are men's

equals, why shouldn't men do the same? For my part I don't see any difference in vulgarity between a girl who marries a fat-tummied banker and a John who snuggles up to a plain Jane. Girls have no more right to expect chivalry than men have to expect gentleness. When bobbed hair came in, girls ceased to be ministering angels."

"Shatterer of idols!" I mop my forehead.

"I'm not shattering your idols,"—she pats my hand consolingly. "They're already shattered. A successful modern marriage is one that pays dividends."

"I can't keep pace with your cynicism," I protest.

"But it isn't cynicism, Uncle Biff; it's honesty. Let's be on the level; we're so far apart that it's hardly possible for your generation to live in peace with mine. But that's no reason for not trying to be understanding. Take the matter of boys and girls: they're male and female grafters, doing their best to out-bluff each other. If a boy's head is screwed on the right way, why shouldn't he win by a lucky marriage what would take him years of unaided effort to accomplish? A girl with any reputation for wealth is rushed by all sorts and kinds. If I'd had a harelip,

it would have made no difference. That being the case, you waste your tears when you weep over my turn-downs. Believe me, they didn't weep over themselves; they sought another Jane, a trifle less handsome, perhaps, whose bank account was bigger."

"I had no idea,"—actually I doubt her—"that the young men of to-day were as mercenary as that."

"Then it's time you woke up," she counsels me cheerfully. "They're worse. I've stated the case mildly. But the fault isn't theirs; it's their parents'. Probably you're not wise to the trick of obtaining dossiers on suitors when a love affair begins to ripen. There was never a boy looked serious, who came to our house, but Daddy got his dossier—not his, but his papa's. I have only the vaguest idea how it's done. I believe you go to your bank. Anyhow, Mummy was perpetually advising me against this boy or that—not to gum myself; though his home had the appearance of wealth, everything his father owned had a plaster on it. Of course it goes without question that the boys' parents took the same precautions with regard to us.

"The effect on me was to heighten my distrust of men. I held off from them, while making

every motion to attract them. I suppose my bloomer with the married Englishman had started my suspicion complex."

I allow her to ramble on. She may be an exception, but I'm learning. From the moment of her coming-out, her parents resigned themselves to build a background for her that they might place her on exhibition as a princess. The entire performance was meretricious. I can readily comprehend how she began to get blurred glimpses of the future. She was expected to peel off her schoolgirl frock and wallow without a qualm in sophistication. Naturally she framed hostile judgments, all of which were suppressed. Wearied with worldliness and the profitless round of late nights and later mornings, she determined that at all costs she would cling to the first disinterested admirer she met and, in the face of every opposition, marry him.

"And the first sincere admirer was Jeff?" I prompt her.

"Yes."

"But there were others with axes to grind—what did you call them?—try-outs before you met him?"

"You bet there were." She eyes me fearlessly. "I collected a proposal a week in my first season."

"How many seasons did you have? I've lost count."

"Three. Mummy was mildly annoyed at the end of the first season when I hadn't collared a steady. At the end of the second she was clean mad. When the third began and she had visions of me remaining forever on her hands, she became plain spiteful. Knowing what I know now I don't wonder. You see poor Mummy, though she's twice my age, can never have too much of being young. She's naturally selfish, as I am; to have to entertain for me, buy clothes for me, lure admiration for me instead of for herself, made her feel tremendously ancient. She was prevented from living her own life; she was living mine. The position was that of a leading actress who had temporarily changed places with her understudy. When we traveled, her object was always the same—to enable me to snare a man. As I displayed no inclination either to snare or be snared, it required more effort on her part to keep me in the limelight. The expense began to worry her. She had gambled on me for three seasons without reward, and the end wasn't in sight.

"Even I began to grow alarmed. The telephone no longer rang ceaselessly with rival boys

clamoring to escort me to proms, football matches, theaters. When it did ring, I was over-eager in my gratitude. There were heaps of social events in which I wasn't included or to which I was too proud to go unaccompanied. In three short years my reign was over. I had slipped into the discarded generation. Even the way I danced dated me. The line I handed boys was old-fashioned and, through too much repetition, mechanical and perfunctory. When I went to dances, I wasn't the cat's pajamas. There were more recent models of débutantes who were considered more snappy. Everything that Alec had prophesied was being proved accurate. But his prophecy hadn't gone far enough. There was one affront that he hadn't revealed to me."

"All of this sounds hysterical bosh," I interrupt. "I can't believe that the three brief years which separate eighteen from twenty——"

"A girl who's a prize at eighteen," she checks me, "is a bargain at twenty. She wilts under the pace. But I was speaking about the affront that Alec hadn't revealed to me. It was this: after three years in society, I was a foolish virgin with no oil in my lamp, who had to borrow other people's oil to keep my lamp burning. What I mean is that there were times when I had to

rely on husbands of girls who had been débutantes with me to take compassion on me. That's an awfully dangerous experiment. When a single girl starts going with a younger married set, all they want her for, as a rule, is to make a goat of her. She wouldn't be wasting her time in their company if she had a John of her own. She's advertising through a megaphone that she's a failure."

"Why on earth?"

"Open your eyes. Why does a married woman invite her? Only because she has a bachelor sidekick and is employing her girl-friend to distract her husband's attention. Embittered husbands, whose marriages haven't turned out a success, are hugely susceptible. If a bust-up occurs, the girl-friend is always blamed. She's left in the cart.

"Mummy was no fool. She sized up what was happening and put her foot down. Her morality, which till now had lain dormant, rose rampant. If I could find no one to run round with but other women's husbands, she was through with me. She advised me to get a job. What job? Thanks to her my only proficiency was in flirtation. She didn't care what job. I was nearly twenty-one—a woman, in fact; it was high time

I thought for myself. Suddenly she became all worked up over my daddy. She wouldn't allow him to be kept out of his bed any longer, sitting up to unseemly hours for me. I was ruining his health. If I wasn't prepared to marry, the best solution was that I take an apartment in New York or go traveling; at least lead my own life without inconveniencing hers.

"I became quite penitent and assured her that I had no aversion to marriage: I hadn't met the man whom I could love. She gave me till the end of the season to meet him. I tried to appeal to her better nature by inquiring whether she hadn't married for love. Her mumbled 'Of course' made me certain that she hadn't. You may have been her intended man, Uncle Biff; at any rate, Daddy wasn't."

"He was richer than I." The confession slips from me.

"Mummy had married for money; she wanted me to marry for money. Desperate as I was, I pledged myself not to copy her error. Marriage is too sacred, Uncle Biff; it means making oneself responsible for unprotected creatures' lives. I remembered the loneliness, the misdirectedness of my childhood—Mummy always away from home, Daddy trying to forget her neglect by

overworking. No thanks. If I bore a child, both parents should be glad of it."

Her sincerity surprises me. I'm afraid to speak lest I betray my thoughts. She's been a wife less than a year and already she's abandoned. Her parents at least footed the bill for their mistake by sticking together. It's a little curious that she should set herself up as more righteous. And then there's the memory of the man who preceded me in her apartment.

The atmosphere grows tense. She's reading me like a book.

"I'm a shabby little hypocrite—that's your verdict."

I try to deny her rendering of my embarrassment.

"Oh, yes, it is. Don't let's lie to each other. You've hurt me, Uncle Biff. I can't force myself to tell you any more to-day."

I shuffle to my feet reluctantly. She sits where she is, staring out at the bleak sky. Having secured my coat and hat, I come back.

"I'm sorry, Mary Angel."

"No need to be." She musters a forgiving smile. "We've completed my adventures with the cherubim. It's appropriate that we should make a new beginning when Jeff enters."

"Then you love Jeff?" I question. "It wasn't a catch-as-catch-can match as some people have hinted?"

"I adored him. I still do."

"I always believed it."

In reverent, middle-aged fashion, which I hope conveys my chivalry, I stoop my lips to her silky, golden head.

Her arms fly up. She's weeping wildly. I kneel beside her.

As unexpectedly as the storm has broken, it spends itself.

"Thank you for believing me. Please go now."

PARADISE WELCOMES MARY ANGEL

HAVING been absent from town a few days, my first thought on my return is for Mary Angel. Entering a public booth, I ring her up from the station.

"Uncle Biff talking."

"Hurray! Thought you'd forsaken me. But you'll never guess where I am. I'm in bed. Been in bed ever since we parted. You'd better hurry if you want to receive my dying statement."

"Look here, Mary, don't scare me. If you're really ill, what's the matter?"

"Wearying for you." This mockingly.

I shower her with questions. Has she a nurse? What does the doctor report? Her hollow cough interrupts and alarms me.

"That sounds bad."

Dead silence. Then a snippy voice demanding, "Number please."

Either Mary has hung up or we have been cut off.

Postponing other engagements, I commandeer a taxi, purchase roses and hothouse grapes, en route, and arrive at Mildred Mansions as breathlessly as if I had been running. I'm tender with forebodings, yet at the back of my mind lurks the suspicion that Mary may be testing my concern for her. Should that prove to be the case, I'm in a mood to shake her. Ungallant! But if I'm a sample, it's the effect she has on most men. One minute they dream of spreading cloaks for her in imitation of Sir Walter Raleigh, the next they yearn to spank her.

A furniture van blocks the entrance. I wonder vaguely whether the tenant's flight is voluntary or compulsory. Is it a case of failure to pay rent or has a baby offended the landlord's delicate sense of decency? At any rate I am spared the usual "Lettuce! Lettuce! Let down your hair" procedure of announcing my presence through the speaking-tube; I pass in with the workmen. Having mounted to the top floor, I press the familiar button. The door is opened a few inches

on the chain. Instead of a uniformed nurse, I glimpse Mary in a dressing gown, her bare feet thrust into slippers.

"Get back to bed," I order.

Her eyes twinkle. Through the crack her voice reaches me huskily.

"Oh, it's you! If I remove the chain, give me a second in which to disappear before you enter."

As I cross the threshold, she's vanishing into her bedroom. Having disposed of my packages, I peer into the kitchen. Louisa, the colored maid, isn't there. A tricky situation for a bachelor! Evidently since her treatment by her parents, Mary has been too proud to notify them. So here she is ill and alone, a grass-widow, a mere child and lovely. Behind the wall while I wait, I hear noises—padding footsteps, banging of drawers and cupboards, occasional fits of coughing.

"You can come in now," she summons me. And with a grin, as she catches sight of me, "Been making myself pretty for you."

Everything in her room is dainty. Cool pillows are propped behind her. A lace spread has been neatly stretched across the coverings. She is wearing a primrose négligé to match her hair.

The young monkey smiles slyly, drinking in my admiration.

"I knew you'd hate to see me mussy. There's nothing seriously the matter with me—so don't look tragic."

"What *is* the matter?"

"A chill, I guess. It's given me this husky voice, so coveted by actresses. Don't you find it attractive?"

"Poor kid!"

Forgetting embarrassment, I approach her bedside.

"Why *poor?*"

I shrug my shoulders.

"Between sheets you're so tiny—no bigger than you were years ago when I'd returned from the front to be demobilized. It was the last time I saw you in bed. How old were you? A schoolgirl. That's how you look now. And here we've been allowing you to paddle your own canoe, telling ourselves that you're a woman and married."

"Pathetic!" She winks at me. "What's in those packages?"

She grabs them and starts untying them. While she's thus occupied, I take in further details of my surroundings. Flowers are standing

about in vases. My memory leaps back to the unknown man who had preceded me in her apartment on my previous visit. I'm chagrined that he should have been there again before me.

She catches me eyeing the unknown's floral tributes.

"I do love flowers. Now that I'm not well, it didn't seem an extravagance to indulge myself."

A white lie! Before I can answer, she creates a fresh diversion by hugging my roses to her.

"How dear of you! You must put them in water. When you're not here, I shall whisper to them, 'Uncle Biff arranged you for me.' "

I hunt a bowl in the kitchen, following her directions. When I return, she's in a new ecstasy over the gift of hothouse grapes.

Is she sincere? Or is the gratitude with which she deluges me the same line of guff she handed to boy-suitors when she was working them up to the point of proposing? In previous conversations she's tried to persuade me that till marriage she was a regular Delilah. I've been loath to believe her. To-day, in her white bed, her flushed face innocent of make-up, she looks guileless and infantile. Her gay reception of me seems a

proof of modesty. And yet, perhaps, I'm a foolhardy Samson.

"Now you've come, you're going to stay." She wrinkles her nose. "Been lonely without you. We'll have an all-day chat. Doesn't that strike you as scrumptious?"

"But I'm not really your uncle—only by adoption. What will people say?" I procrastinate.

"I won't vamp you," she pleads mischievously. "Besides, we've business—to get forward with our collaboration." Then as a further inducement, "Louisa will be here presently."

I mark my surrender by drawing up a chair.

"I've been thinking rather deeply lately about the things you've told me." I take possession of her caressing hand. "It seems to me that in whatever age, people were much the same. Parents have always been afraid that their children were going to the devil; children have always excused themselves on the score that they were more enlightened. The modernity of to-day will be the modernity of to-morrow. When we're young, we all pride ourselves that we're pathfinders. Take this recent fad of beauty specialists for plucking eyebrows——"

She interrupts me with laughter.

"Old scoundrel! You're giving yourself away. Who let you into that secret?"

"A book I was reading on the train. It referred to a treatise on feminine deportment, written by a Frenchman as a warning to his daughters in the fourteenth century—so even then youth must have been flaming. He'd been in his grave a hundred years by the time Columbus discovered America, yet the flappers of his day were up to the same tricks that you are in ours. 'Pluck no eyebrows,' he advises his daughters, 'neither temples, nor forehead.' Doubtless they voted him an old bore who didn't know his onions, treating him with the same contempt that you display toward your elders. There's nothing like history for correcting one's perspective."

My erudition endows me with temporary authority. She's fascinated by the discovery that girls of the fourteenth century did the same silly things to their faces that she does to hers. She wants to know whether their mamas gave coming-out parties for them, encouraged them in necking, and whether their papas sat up at night for them.

My learning, which was gleaned from a footnote, is exhausted.

"Mammas have always been wild to see their daughters married," I dismiss the subject. "Papas have always had to scratch for the money to provide their womenfolk with follies. 'Bread and butter! Bread and butter! Ever since the world began, cramming his head to butter his bread has been the lot of man.' "

"Guess you're right." She helps herself delicately to a hothouse grape. "Women are luxuries. That was part of my trouble with Jeff—why he left me."

The introduction of her husband's name affords me the excuse for renewing my research regarding the causes of her matrimonial marooning.

"Let me see. How far had we got in our collaboration? You'd chased and been chased by every pair of pants in sight. You'd necked and petted on sofas, in automobiles—anywhere and everywhere that came handy. You'd cadged proposals as an Indian snatches scalps, for the self-esteem of adding them to your collection."

"And the boys had become wise to me." She takes up the running. "There were some who'd been really in love with me, the way you were with Mummy. When I rejected them, they went on the tear, remained drunk for a week; one of

them threatened suicide. Their mamas began to talk against me. I earned the reputation for being a hard-boiled virgin."

"I've heard the term—not as applied to you, Mary. But what precisely is a hard-boiled virgin?"

"A maiden who intends to remain a virgin and acts as though she didn't. Goodness knows, I derived little pleasure from it."

"Then why?"

"External pressure, my dear Unkie. The theory of being launched as a débutante is that between eighteen and twenty you're fated to meet the only John you can live with politely till you're seventy. The theory's rubbish. A man falls in love because he can't help himself; a girl kids herself she falls in love because she has to. What else can she do when she's been trained for nothing and her parents have spent loads of money to get her married? Not to get married is ingratitude. When I captured a new beau, Mummy was flattering; when I let him slip through my fingers, she was sulky. For the sake of peace I forced my countenance to shine on every John or Willie who showed signs of needing encouragement. That sounds dishonest; but how was I to know whether he was my particu-

lar John or Willie till I'd tried him out?"

"The trying-out process must have proved expensive to your victims," I object. "Callous tactics of that sort drive decent fellows to profligacy or intimidate them into remaining bachelors. If your mother hadn't tried me out, I might have looked elsewhere. You see, my dear, I adore children. But I'm saying more than I intend."

Beneath the sheets, like a contrite puppy, she wriggles closer.

"I've been punished, Uncle Biff. Now that it's over, I condemn myself. I didn't realize that I was being cruel. Most of my beaux I truly liked. I wanted them as brothers. While they were the way you and I are, I was all sweetness to them. It was when they became mushy that I despised them."

"But what did you expect when you'd manufactured the opportunities?"

"Now you're the one who's unfair." She rears herself up in protest. "How could I tell whether I was able to love them till they got to kissing? As a rule when they did I hated them. You'd have to be a girl to understand. The funniest change comes over you. When a man starts to paw, you become coldly sane and regard him as

a frothing maniac. Worse than that, you want to scratch. You remember that Brazilian who attempted liberties at St. Jean de Luz? I bit him. Well, if you must have the truth, save for my innate refinement, that's what I longed to do to most of them."

"There's no good getting excited."

I coax her back to the pillows. As I straighten the sheets she smiles angelically.

"You're terribly sweet. It was too bad of Mummy. You ought to have had children."

I take refuge from her compassion in a fresh display of scholarship.

"If my memory does not betray me, the Spartans auctioned off their daughters by a far more forthright method than our débutante racket. On an appointed day they threw one gigantic necking party. All the bachelors eligible for the stag-line and all the rose-bud maidens were roped in by government dog-catchers, crowded into an unlighted cellar and the doors were shut. In the darkness, not knowing which was what, the boys and girls paired off. After a decent interval, when the doors were opened, they were compelled by law to stick to their bargain."

"Taking pot luck with a vengeance," Mary chuckles.

Having captured her interest, I exploit my advantage.

"Ah, but in Sparta they stood for no nonsense; when once you were married, you stayed married. The girl's father took her home to live under his protection. He sat up nights with her brothers to hurl stones at her husband should he attempt to molest her. A husband who insisted on a honeymoon was as roughly handled as a burglar."

"What was the great idea?" Mary opens her eyes widely.

"To make her forbidden, my dear. People who serve in candy stores don't eat chocolates. You lose your appetite for anything that you can have without effort. The papas of Sparta weren't keen on sons-in-law who lost their appetites, so they made their daughters seem precious by keeping the mouths of their sons-in-law watering."

"By Jingo, they were foxy." Mary puckers her smooth forehead. "If Daddy had thrown stones at Jeff, instead of throwing me at him, he'd have had to climb drainpipes to steal a glimpse of me. I would have continued to be a mystery and therefore to infatuate him. You've laid your finger on another hypocrisy of parents

—their idiotic ideas about modesty. Having wrapped a daughter up so that the minimum amount of her naturalness was showing, they suddenly hustle her and her young man before a priest who addresses them publicly as though they were naked. Then everybody washes his hands of them, as much as to say, 'You brought this on your own heads.' Love ceases to be stolen glances; it becomes one long, permitted stare.

"This should be the point where Jeff enters the picture," I nail her.

She takes her time before complying.

"I didn't deserve him." She speaks slowly. "I'd been out three seasons. I'd cut all the senseless capers girls cut who have ambitious mothers. Mummy's moan was that I hadn't broken into New York society. New York society didn't want me. It had fillies of its own to market. Nevertheless, to prove that I wasn't a complete dumbbell, I did kick in doors and and rub shoulders with its elect for brief moments."

"How was it done?"

"Nothing easier. A boy with a dress suit who belongs to a college fraternity can go anywhere. There are professional hostesses who collect lists of such boys. When a rich snob wants to bring out a daughter, she engages a professional hostess

to augment the stag-line. Of course, since they're no better than gigolos without the pay of gigolos, the collegians have no right to turn up accompanied. But sometimes I could persuade one to sneak me in with him. You'll say that it was bad taste on my part; but it was equally bad taste to bribe with champagne young men whom you didn't know, to dance with your friends' daughters. My escorts regarded such party-throwers as fair game; they attended their functions tongue-in-cheek, feeling that they owed them no courtesy. As an interloper, I was under still less obligation. So if we didn't consider the entertainment up to snuff, we pulled stakes and crashed some other muck-a-muck's jamboree to which neither of us had been invited. It required a certain amount of nerve, for we ran the risk of being spotted and shown the sidewalk by detectives."

I gaze at her in amazement.

"But the humiliation of it, Mary, to be flung into the streets like a pickpocket! Where lay the fun——"

"It was business." With a touch of her hot little hand she silences me. "If the only John who could make me happy refused to come to me, it was up to me to go in search of him.

Every passing moment robbed me of my rarity. I'd exhausted my own hunting grounds, so I started poaching on other people's. And I wasn't cheating anything like as badly as you fancy. The New York party-throwers had cheated first by luring our boys away without including us, so that our local dances often became flops. I was merely getting a little of my own back."

"But you didn't find him by such methods?"

"Sorry to disappoint you." Rolling her head, she winks wickedly. "I'd crashed a party at Sherry's. Who was the giver I never heard. I was jigging the light fantastic with my escort, when a stranger cut in and claimed me. He was the handsomest man, tall, dark-haired, gray eyes, aristocratic. I fell for him without a whimper. I hadn't been thrilled by anyone the way he thrilled me since I'd parted from my first love, the Englishman. I thrilled him, too. There was no mistaking that. He cut in on me repeatedly. Each time he held me closer and his eyes became more burning. He wanted to learn my name, the kind of things by which he could trace me. I didn't dare inform him for reasons that are obvious. I was quite certain that he was appallingly well connected; so I spoofed him that I was Cinderella and would vanish at midnight. 'I shan't

require your slipper to discover you,' he chipped back. 'I'll consult the list of guests. But how does it happen that in our set this is the first time I've stumbled across you?'

"He was leading me to supper, when someone who looked like a head waiter tapped him on the shoulder. His face went blank. 'Excuse me, Cinderella. Back in a moment.' He went off with the head waiter and that was the last I saw of him."

"Then why mention him?"

"The last for that evening." she corrected. "I'd fallen for him and he'd fallen for me. We'd been getting along like a house afire. My luck, wasn't it? The head waiter was a detective. He'd given the love of my life the bum's rush. What for? you ask. For being what I was—a bluffer; he, too, had crashed the party. My fear was that my turn would come next, so I folded my 'tent like the Arab,' etc."

"Look here, Mary," my tone is impatient, "stop fooling. Bring Jeff into the story."

"You big goose," she giggles, "I have brought him."

"I didn't recognize him from your description," I gasp. "I never thought of him as handsome."

"He is," she flares, instantly on the defensive.

"Wholesome—scarcely handsome," I mumble. Then the humor of her revelation tickles my merriment. "All the airs your mother gave herself when your engagement was announced! All the romantic stories she invented to account for your meeting! And now to discover that you attracted your future husband under such circumstances!"

"I don't blame you for laughing." Mary smirks a trifle ruefully. "If I'd been a shopgirl with a borrowed frock, I could have crashed the party and allured him. Ours was a case of love at first sight. Mummy's hectic schemings contributed nothing to our match. I never needed to have become a débutante. Daddy could have slept the clock round; he was only wasting time sitting up for me. Our marriage was fated—that's how I figure things. Perhaps all marriages are. I don't know. A girl goes to mail a letter or runs to catch a trolley, and there he is waiting for her. It makes all this window-dressing of bringing girls out and dancing them off their poor little legs look silly. If your generation believed in destiny, God, any power that shapes our ends, I might have lived usefully from

eighteen to twenty, fitting myself to make a success of what lay before me."

"You're being wise after the event." I stroke my chin judicially. "Your mother wasn't a crystal-gazer. She gave you every chance—mistakenly perhaps, and probably too conventionally. But——"

"Say it," she urges.

"The way affairs are at present, do you still believe that Jeff was your appointed man?"

"Not a doubt of it."

"In that case, it's up to the rest of your story to prove it."

I presume I have been too outspoken. Slipping lower in the bed, she lies pulseless as a carved statue—as that one of Agnes Sorel, the king's mistress, in the bare little chapel at Loches. I don't suppose she's ever seen it. If she has, since she lives always on the surface, she does not remember. Yet her pose is a perfect duplicate, fingers touching point to point on her meek breast, feet close together as if bound, the body resigned and passionless, seeming more long in its straightness than is natural. One wonders, knowing as little as any man knows about any woman, whether there exist more intimate spiritual re-

semblances. Agnes Sorel was a wanton who could feign saintliness. Whatever culture she possessed was utterly physical. She sold her dearness at an absurdly high figure.

The same is true of Mary Angel. Her fleshly grace mirrors virtue and masks ribald deeds with the simper of innocence. How much she feels when she declares she suffers is a guess. How much she loves when she asserts she adores is a conundrum. She employs familiar words to speak an unintelligible language. When she purrs it isn't necessarily a sign of affection.

It's my conviction that women are instinctively more carnal than men. They rouse yearning with the composed serenity of seraphs and complete their imposture by filling their male audience with a forlorn sense of impurity. Perhaps they are not consciously sly. To give them the benefit of the doubt, perhaps they dream themselves into the nobility they are acting. Their mission on earth is to baffle. God alone holds the clue to their secrets. They have no souls, says the Mohammedan, dismissing their mystery. The solution is not satisfying.

As a relief from tension I ask a banal question.

"Oughtn't Louisa to be here by now?"

"Hang Louisa!" she replies listlessly. "I expect

she's taken the day off. If you're hungry, you'll find food in the ice box."

Seizing the pretext to absent myself, I explore the kitchen. When I return with a tray, she's recovered her good temper. As we share the results of my foraging, she chatters.

"I was a silly-billy to take offense. Naturally being so fond of me you take a smudgy view of Jeff. When you've learned everything, you'll see him through my eyes. He's the most chivalrous person. But let's draw together the tangled threads. My popularity was waning. Less shop-soiled maidens were collaring attention. I'd got myself into jams and was classified as a great little promiser—the kind who at the first spot of rain runs home to fetch her umbrella. Owing to these and similar causes, I was being driven to mix with the younger married crowd. As I've told you in a previous conversation, the newly-wed wives had side-kick admirers and only invited me that I might act nurse-maid to their hubbies. I'm stating my condition flippantly; actually it was pathetic. I'd started out to be a Derby winner and was in danger of becoming a cab horse. In the words of Rudyard, I was 'dropping down the ladder rung by rung.' The rest of the quotation's equally appropriate: The

measure of my torment was the measure of my youth. God help me, for I knew the worst too young!"

"Stop being theatric." I lose patience. "The worst that you'd known was stolen kisses, which by your own account you hadn't relished. To hear you talk one might suppose you were a female Don Juan, a dissolute rag instead of a delicately nurtured child standing on life's threshold."

"You've hit the bull's-eye!" She nods her head. "I wasn't actually dissolute; I was becoming. Being a man, Uncle Biff, you can't have any idea of a girl's humiliation who's been trained to catch a man and hasn't. Her self-confidence collapses like a balloon. It's for all the world like an attack of nerves. There's something wrong with her stuff. She must change it. But how? Should she become more bold or more cautious? Everything about her which once was so applauded now brings only mild results. She grows reckless, scraps her ideals, and prepares to compromise."

"Compromise! How do you mean, Mary?"

"Marry a man she likes or doesn't positively dislike, instead of waiting for the one she can love. My chance of marrying was to appear in

public as often as I was invited. Mummy nagged me. She invaded my privacy to conduct heart-to-heart talks, which invariably degenerated into post-mortems on my wasted opportunities. Her intentions were fine, but they drove me to desperation. My chief blunder, according to her, was that I'd shown myself too eager. I'd cut boys out from the herd, squeezed them into corners, and made them propose at revolver-point. My technique had been too apparent. I ought to have been more subtle. For instance, I ought to have employed herself and Daddy as a foreground, instead of which I'd hustled them into cupboards directly a prospective beau hove on the horizon.

"No good arguing with her. No good reminding her that whatever I had done had been under her instructions. If anyone had made a mess of me, she had. To avoid her reproaches I invented appointments and wandered the streets. I concocted the most elaborate lies to deceive her that I was still popular. When the married crowd began to include me, their attention was a godsend. I accepted their invitations despite the risks I ran. Night after night I listened to doleful plaints of young husbands, unable to get along with their young wives, who urged me to do a bunk with them. A good many had been my

rejections, who had plunged into matrimony on the rebound."

"How did you meet Jeff again?" I interrupt.

"Who's telling this story?" She pulls a face. "If you're to understand Jeff, you must grasp my full tragedy. After three frantic years of searching, I'd found him only to be parted from him by the bum's rush. His method of vanishing had been undignified enough to bring tears to a fish's eyes. I cried myself to sleep that night —or what was left of it. In the morning I was fully persuaded that I was a reformed character. I'd slipped back to the piety which the nuns had taught me. Going on my knees in my racy pink nightgown—and it was racy, Uncle Biff, awfully sheer with lace insertion—I promised God everything if He'd guide me to my Prince Charming."

"Give Jeff the spotlight. We're well aware that you were guided."

"Obviously, since I married him; but not at once. While I waited, I was a prey to the most harrowing anxieties. He might be a gangster."

"But he wasn't," I strive to expedite her.

"Listen, Uncle Biff; this is my autobiography. You're no more than a collaborator. Mummy couldn't get the hang of me, I'd become so homeabiding. I suppose she got sick of the sight of

me. Anyway it was she who hounded me out to the last of those young married parties. Of course I knew what would be expected of me. Nancy, my hostess, would have provided herself with an eligible bachelor who would cast sheep's eyes at her, while my job would be to hold down her better half, Henry. And believe me, he was her better half."

"One minute," I thrust in my spoke. "What kick did this Nancy derive from flirtation when she possessed an absolutely-her-own husband?"

Mary frowns thoughtfully. "I guess her débutante days had taught her to be promiscuous; she found the change to monogamy monotonous. Maybe she was trying to enhance her value by demonstrating that she didn't need to belong to any man exclusively. You see, she didn't have a Spartan father to throw stones at Henry and keep his mouth watering. However, Nancy's only an incident; I'm the leading lady. As I was saying, I knew what to expect. I would be squashed into the back seat of an automobile beside a sullen male. The pair of us would be of no more importance than so much baggage. The radiant, desired Nancy would take the wheel to show her expertness at driving. The covetous side-kick would crush close to her, eat-

ing her up with his eyes and guffawing in rhythm with her girlish laughter. Our destination would be a road house, where Nancy would treat me to an exhibition of how to appear single though married."

"Why did she marry him—I think you said his name was Henry—if it was only to neglect him?"

"For safety. As a married woman she could persuade her old beaux to come back. She talked baby talk, shook cocktails, and dyed her hair. She wasn't a particularly nice girl—but then neither was I."

"I hate to hear you traducing yourself," I explode.

"Afraid you'll have to put up with it; but it's nearly finished. Within the next sentence or two I enter Paradise. When Henry called for me he was sore as a boil. Part of the technique, by the way, is to have the husband call for the single girl. It impresses trustful mamas as being respectable. If scandal arises it's the girl's fault; her own mama is the first to take sides against her. Nancy had said to Henry in her most honeyed tones, no doubt, 'Darling, isn't it time you went for Mary?' He knew darned well what she wanted: a free hand and no spectators while she per-

formed the snake-charmer trick on his rival. His idea of tit-for-tat was to attempt to stage a petting party with me on the return journey. I staved him off by promising, 'Perhaps later.' And wasn't I glad I'd had the strength of mind? As we entered their living room we surprised Nancy playing Mrs. Potiphar to a handsome Joseph. He sprang away embarrassed; then dashed forward and seized my hands."

" 'Of all the luck! It's Cinderella.'

" 'I see you don't need introducing,' Nancy spoke tartly.

" 'You bet we don't. But why we don't is our secret.' He winked at me.

"Perhaps that was the moment I entered Paradise—or was it later? Nothing was happening according to Hoyle. He stuck close to me as though afraid he would again lose me. When Nancy coaxed him to share the front seat and help her drive, he chose the back and fumbled for my hand. Don't ask what we talked about. Nothing that I can remember. We were too ecstatic.

"I suppose I ought to have been furious at him for allowing himself to be vamped. I ought to have been terribly cold and moral. I wasn't.

He seemed a naughty boy, heaps younger than myself.

"On the front seat Nancy and Henry were quarreling. They'd won everything we coveted; they could always be together. The one thing we longed for was to be always together. The thought never occurred to us that if we were always together, we, too, might be bored.

"The evening passed in a mist of tenderness. Jeff and I danced and danced to escape the other two. We were deliciously selfish—and afraid they might start questioning.

"Well, we drove back paired off as we had arrived, only much earlier than had been planned. Like most women when they want an excuse for being catty, Nancy pretended to have a blinding headache. Henry, the poor fish, was terribly concerned and contrite. A domestic row was pending, when short of their house Jeff spotted a taxi.

" 'I'll see Miss Angel home,' he volunteered generously.

"We almost ran—hardly paused to bid them good-night. We were hungry to be alone. You must have experienced the sensation when you were in love with Mummy. We'd have been content, if no other hiding place had offered, to

crawl into a barrel. The moment the man had slammed the door, even before the taxi had budged, Jeff was crushing me. I snuggled shamelessly. When he kissed me, which he did ravenously—he literally gobbled me—I felt none of the old revolt. I didn't hate, want to bite or scratch. He was trembling all over; I yearned to comfort him. I would have allowed him to hurt me if it could have comforted him."

"Which only proves that you were in love," I comment dryly.

"Exactly." She squeezes my fingers. "What a dear you are to understand! We had only a few blocks to go. I swear to you I never saw one street lamp. My lips were glued to his—a regular meal of it, as the Australian soldier said. In the twinkling of an eye we were halted. As he followed me into the hall, I wanted to shout up the stairs to Mummy that I was redeemed—or whatever is the right word; anyhow, that I was no longer a sordid man-snatcher.

"Now that we were in my house, he seemed to realize that he had no right there. He became restrained and sheepish. I had to urge him to take off his topcoat. He acted like a burglar who had come to steal something; which, of course, he had. I assured him that nobody would disturb

us—that my parents were snugly snoring. I had to work hard to coax him, but at last I got him nestled beside me on the couch.

"The little I knew about him ought to have made me wary. The nothing he knew about me ought to have made me immaculate. Don't forget that I'd only seen him twice: the first time receiving the bum's rush; the second being vamped by a married woman. He couldn't guess that I'd deserved the bum's rush as much as he had. He must have been tortured by recalling the snobbish questions he'd asked me as to why he'd never stumbled across me in his set. Poor dear, he was entirely at my mercy. I divined what was the matter with him, so I accused him insincerely.

" 'You think I'm too easy.'

" 'You're adorable. You're perfect.'

"I was in his arms again, both of us gibbering as though we were feeble-minded. He went on applying adjectives, shining as a string of pearls. It was healing to listen to him after the wholesale disparagements with which Mummy had regaled me. At the same time I felt a cheat: I wanted to confess about all the boys I had allowed to nibble me on that very couch. He, too, was crazy to confess. But when he tried to blacken

himself, hinting at a past which made him unworthy, I slipped my hand over his mouth.

"'Not to-night. We've found each other. Heaven rejoiceth over one sinner that repenteth.'

"I might have added, 'When two repent, it paints the town red.' I didn't.

"To state our condition mildly, we were nutty. What we did to express our nuttiness is our own business. Our conversation was language without words, hugs, and kisses—*mum, mum, mum.* We were so delirious that we didn't notice time's passage or the creaking of the stairs.

"All of a sudden, there stood Daddy, an avenging Jehovah in a dressing gown. If you wouldn't know I was lying, I would swear that he had grown a long beard. He looked so avenging that my hair bristled."

"Your father is as young as I am." I affect nonchalance. "A long beard is out of the question."

"But darling," she butts me, "he thought that Jeff was Henry. He'd never seen Henry. It was nearly three o'clock. Even the fire had got tired of us and gone out. Daddy was too funny, frightening, appalling. As I discovered later, Mummy had shooed him into this display of courage.

She'd decided to alter her tactics and remodel me into a dear, modest little girl. Thinking that Jeff was Henry had decided her.

" 'Go home to your wife, young man,' Daddy trumpeted.

Jeff rose to the occasion like a man.

" 'I have the pleasure to inform you that I'm going to marry your daughter.'

"He had his nerve, since he hadn't proposed to me.

"Daddy pointed a finger at me.

" 'Upstairs, you, to your bed.'

"Then to Jeff, 'Out and make it snappy.'

"With a superb contempt for Jehovah, Jeff caught me round the waist.

" 'One last mouthful, Cinderella, and to hell with your old man.'

"I fled to my bedroom and locked the door. I heard Daddy halt outside it and hesitate. Not till the house was silent did I remember that I hadn't the foggiest notion of how or where to get in touch with Jeff.

"They say that all the world loves a lover. It isn't true. There's no sight more irritating. Here was Mummy who'd been urging me for years to be in love. Next morning she was as mad as a hatter. Daddy was even madder; his masculine

possessiveness was aroused. Someone was robbing him of his treasured daughter. To convince him that Jeff wasn't Henry didn't cool him. He was determined to be angry. Who was the fellow whom I'd allowed to pick me up? Unfortunately I couldn't tell. Where had I first met him? That news also was unfit for publication.

" 'I've been too lenient,' Daddy stormed. 'I don't keep a road house. All this looseness is going to end.'

"Before he banged down to business he informed me that my latchkey was canceled and that for the future I'd be in my bed by midnight.

"A nice how-do-you-do! I'd bagged my man, attained my goal, and this was their method of congratulation. I sought Henry and extorted Jeff's address. To Jeff I sent a wire, 'Lunch with me at the Ritz—intentions honorable.'

"We didn't lunch at the Ritz as a matter of fact. Having rendezvous-ed, we hired a taxi and came to roost in a speak-easy uptown. Jeff made a poor joke to excuse our change of program; he said he could speak to me more easily there.

"Our knees squashed together beneath a little table, I enlightened him as to the parental attitude.

" 'God wishes our parents on us,' I said, 'we choose our husbands.'

"He lived in New Jersey, I learned. There was nothing to prevent us from procuring a marriage license. He dampened my ardor by asserting,

" 'Cinderella, you've got me wrong. I'm a sham.'

"There's no need to recapitulate everything that he said; a good deal of it you can guess, especially the part about his having crashed the party and having been thrown out. You see, he didn't know that I knew. What made him more conscience-stricken was that he still fancied I was one of the society belles who had been legitimately invited.

" 'Don't feel badly,' I let him off; 'I crashed the party, too.'

"After that he felt less inferior.

" 'But that's not all,' he took delight in hammering himself. 'All your encounters with me have been unfortunate. You must think me a perfect worm. There's finding me with Nancy to be explained. I don't expect you to believe me; I'm Henry's friend. I hadn't the slightest notion that his wife had designs on me.'

"I'm afraid I was disconcertingly flippant.

" 'God moves in a mysterious way His wonders to perform. If He chose Nancy as His instrument, I'm not kicking. There's only one question of the least importance: do you intend to marry me?'

" 'Do I intend!'

"He opened his mouth so wide that I caught a glimpse of every one of his perfect teeth. They're all perfect, Uncle Biff—not a single filling.

" 'Hold hard before you commit yourself,' I checked him. 'If you're already married, separated or divorced, that's no obstacle. I'll live with you.' "

"You didn't say that!" I protest.

"Bingo! Like that," she grimaces. "Wasn't I the rapacious female? And I'm sure I don't see why you're shocked. To be married to a person you don't love is adultery. To live with a person you do love is marriage. Marriage, in the conventional sense, however you attempt to sanctify it, is nothing more nor less than a male and female living together. Well, he was neither married, divorced, nor separated—so we got down to hard tacks.

"I'd been prepared to learn that he was penniless. Luckily he wasn't. He was two years out

of Yale and earning thirty a week in Wall Street —somewhat less than Daddy pays his chauffeur. To counterbalance that, however, his family was prosperous; as prosperous as mine, I gathered. His father made him an allowance of three thousand a year.

" 'If I take a wife he'll certainly continue it and probably add to it.'

" 'And my daddy won't do less than he's done for me as a single girl,' I assured him.

"He wanted to straighten matters at once by accompanying me home; but I deterred him.

" 'Our marriage isn't particularly our parents' affair,' I told him. 'After all, you and I are the people who'll have to stay married. For my part, I'd rather make a runaway match of it. But I suppose we owe them something: they raised us, even if they did make a bad job of it. So we'll please them by pretending to consult them.'

"Jeff was ridiculously concerned for my reputation. He said he adored me for wanting to run away with him, but such a course would cause scandal. We decided to go through all the motions of being conventional.

"When I arrived home I found that Mummy had been Sherlock Holmesing; she'd interviewed

Nancy. You can judge the noble report of Jeff she'd received from a woman scorned. She withheld her fire till dinner was ended. Over coffee in the library I busted the tranquillity.

" 'Great news! I'm engaged.'

"If I'd announced that I was going to have a baby I couldn't have produced a more icy silence. Mummy wagged her head sorrowfully.

" 'I've been making inquiries. Why must you always jam yourself in with impossible persons?'

"Nancy's bucket of poison followed. Jeff was a masher, not serious, a fortune-hunter, a chaser of married skirts.

" 'My poor darling'—Mummy stole her tragic stuff from the great Sarah—'he could never make you happy.'

"My retort came in a gush, like Old Faithful when you've thrown soap into him. With interruptions and recriminations, it seems to me to have gushed for hours. Nancy was a liar; but suppose for once she'd spoken the truth—which she hadn't. If Jeff was a masher, how much better was any boy who had ever entered our house? They'd picked me up at proms, house parties, balls. I'd invited them to call on me and, when they'd accepted, had had difficulty in remembering their names. I'd been permitted to sit up

with nobody to protect me. If Jeff was a fortune-hunter, so was I. Mummy had preached marriage for money as the highest morality. If Jeff had chased married skirts, I'd coddled married pants. If he wasn't serious, we were well matched: from the moment I'd come out I hadn't cherished a thought above the clothes I put on and catering to my followers.

"I could see that what I said was having an effect on Daddy, so I tossed Mummy into the cart by appealing to him direct.

" 'Mummy's made me the fool I am. She's made you look a fool, too, Daddy. I'm wanting to be decent.'

"He tried to sit me on his knee, the way he used when I was a little girl. I resisted.

" 'It's a show-down. I'm going to marry the man I love. This is the time I refuse to be managed.'

"Then I clapped my handkerchief to my eyes, ran to my bedroom, and barricaded myself. Safe from observation, I grinned into the mirror and listened. When footsteps approached I made the appropriate noises of one shaken by sobbing.

"Next morning a more reasonable attitude replaced the 'I-know-better-than-you-my-daughter' line of argument. At breakfast Daddy in-

formed me that, as he had done with all my beaux, he proposed to obtain Jeff's dossier.

" 'More suspicion!' I sniffed. 'It won't make the least difference.'

" 'But promise to hold your horses,' he begged; 'I'm trying to be wise for you.'

"Holding my horses meant not seeing Jeff till the detective agency, bank, or whomever Daddy employed to do his snooping, had sent in a report. When it came, it revealed nothing damaging. Jeff's father was a corporation lawyer. His financial status was similar to ours. His wife took trips to Europe. He kept four servants, a gardener, and a chauffeur. His credit was good. Everything was stated except his blood pressure. As for Jeff, who was an only child, he'd attended the correct schools, a correct university, and was estimated as plodding rather than brilliant.

"I was advised that Jeff was to be permitted to call. Permitted! Wasn't that juicy?

"When he came to be introduced to my parents he took the strictly honorable course of bringing his father. Jeff and I were sent upstairs to await the result of our parents' confabbing.

"We didn't care what they decided; our minds were made up. If it amused them to believe that they were arranging our destinies, we weren't

mean enough to deprive them of their pleasure. We were convinced that while they feigned to be chiefly interested in our happiness, what they were actually investigating was money. In the library they were haggling like horse thieves about the price at which to unload their responsibilities. Daddy and Mummy were hopeful that in return for my valuable affection Jeff's father would propose a lump settlement. Jeff's instincts and mine were a thousand times more wholesome, since we were trustful enough without bargaining to set up housekeeping.

"For three hours we were left to make unlimited love, wondering what on earth could be keeping our elders gassing. It was close on midnight when they summoned us. There they sat, looking owl-eyed and disgruntled. Having fenced till they were exhausted, they'd come to grips about nothing.

"Jeff's father glanced up with a tight-lipped smile.

" 'Well, Doctor,'—that was his nickname for Jeff—'I hear you want to be married. How much are you earning? Thirty a week. One hundred and twenty a month. Do you think that'll pro-

vide for this little lady? It wouldn't pay for one of her frocks.'

"Then he treated us to the history of his own courtship. His father hadn't assisted him with a nickel. He'd had to wait five years till he could afford to become a husband. Working to earn her had made him value his wife. It made him value his child. Best of all, it had trained him in habits of industry. There was heaps more of this self-laudatory muck. We listened with affected sympathy. We were expecting to hear him say that no boy of his should taste the bitterness of postponement. Not a bit of it. He switched to a speech in favor of our skinflint grandparents who hadn't spoiled their children with too much credit. In his opinion, if the young wives of our day were compelled to do more pram-pushing there would be fewer divorces. Subsidized marriages meant ill-considered marriages. If matrimony were made more difficult the results would be more profitable.

"None of us had the courage to tell him that he was suffering from mental hiccups. His own case and his son's weren't parallel. If his father hadn't lent him a nickel, it was because he hadn't a nickel to lend; whereas he'd spent his entire

life amassing money and curtailing Jeff's initiative by his over-lavishness. To see Jeff riding horseback, rolling about in high-priced cars, hobnobbing with millionaires' daughters had advertised his own affluence. If he wasn't joking, he was threatening to punish Jeff with penury for his disloyalty in wishing to set up his own establishment. And, mind you, he got this off with the cheerful good humor of a benefactor.

"Jeff and I clung together, staring at our judges who invented noble reasons for making our future thorny.

"Without warning, Jeff Senior jumped up. He must have sensed that if he stopped longer he was bound to be cornered.

" 'It's growing late, Doctor. I'm off to Chicago to-morrow. Things will settle themselves.'

"He'd talked us wuzzy and had committed himself to nothing. Honors were even. Neither had my parents.

"All the committing was done by myself and Jeff. We'd become poets. We saw 'magic casements, opening on the foam of perilous seas, in faery lands forlorn,' where ordinary people saw only pavements. It was as though we'd fallen heir to an invisible fortune. We were in that hallelujah frame of mind when all our dirty little

faults seemed to have been stripped from us and neatly laundered in the blood of the lamb. I'm not trying to be irreverent, Uncle Biff; I'm trying to explain that a miracle had happened, of which everyone, save ourselves, seemed to be unaware. We'd been whisked up in a spiritual elevator to Paradise, where we would hunger no more, neither thirst any more. Our parents' mercenary fussiness filled us with pitying contempt.

"Next day Jeff gave me his interpretation of his father's attitude.

" 'The old boy thinks of us as children. He believes that this is a new game we're playing. We must force his hand by making our own plans.'

"Jeff's first step was to sell his runabout to buy a ring for me—this tiny one I'm wearing. That proved to Daddy that Jeff meant business; he summoned him to a conference. As usual Mummy did most of the talking.

" 'You mustn't think we've got anything against you,' she opened the session; 'but you've not been frank with us. We know so little about you.'

"What the dickens did they wish to know—the position and nature of his birthmarks? Jeff looked puzzled.

" 'We had a charming social time with your

father the other night,' she continued, 'but the purpose of his visit wasn't mentioned till you joined us and he chaffed you. I don't think he took your engagement to Mary seriously. Neither can we, if she has to delay till you're earning sufficient to support her. What I mean is that Mr. Angel and myself don't believe in long engagements. It isn't fair to ask a girl who's as popular as Mary to wait and pass up other chances. What I mean is that once a girl's engaged, other men treat her as out of the running. Her good times are ended. And then she has no redress if, at the end of a year or so, you change your mind and transfer your affections.'

" 'No danger of that,' Jeff laughed. 'Our idea is to do it now.'

" 'On what? Not on thirty dollars a week,' Mummy pounced on him.

" 'My father——' Jeff began.

" 'Your father has volunteered nothing. Mary's been raised in the lap of luxury. She's been attended hand and foot. You can't reasonably expect us to entrust you with her happiness without the assurance that you possess the wherewithal to make her happy.'

"And so on and so on. Protecting my inter-

ests. Jeff assured her that his father could be relied on to do what was handsome.

" 'But a bird in the hand . . .' Mummy stabbed at him.

"One might have supposed that getting married was a business deal in which nothing but dollars counted. High character, a healthy body, the ability to be companionable weren't even of secondary importance.

"Mummy exaggerated the amount it had cost to educate me to be the useless idiot I was; the cost of my lady's maid, my frocks, my undies. Well, perhaps not my undies, though there was little she left to the imagination. In the list of my splendors she omitted that my sole accomplishments were for self-adornment and sending boys crazy. I couldn't sweep, cook, mend, and didn't know a thing about babies.

"To her avalanche of inquiries Jeff replied stubbornly that he was prepared to work hard."

"One minute, Mary Angel," I halt her. "I've heard you young people referred to as the lost generation. You inherited all the disillusionment of the war and none of its heroism. You believed that the asses—meaning patriarchs of my age—who permitted such an atrocity weren't worth consulting. You proceeded to build your own

world and become a law unto yourselves. There was no holding you—no convincing you that two and two make four. If you insisted that they made seven, then we must be the imbeciles. Take the scenes you've just been painting. Your father discovers you at past two in the morning with a man he doesn't know from Adam. It develops that you scarcely know him from Adam either, yet you swear that you're going to marry him. Because your parents—his and yours—don't come across promptly with a cash offer, you accuse them of being niggardly. And, by the way, what part did your father take in those discussions? You've told me what your mother said, but his voice has been silent."

"It was," she nods. "His policy was watchful waiting. You couldn't have guessed whether he was too lazy to interfere or saving his breath for a crisis. He was living up to our national code of good manners, that husbands must be seen and not heard.

"But to get forward with my story, Jeff and I took the bull by the horns by having printed in the newspapers that our engagement was rumored. It was up to Mummy and Daddy either to deny or confirm the rumor. They had to confirm it. Instantly I was again in the limelight, the

way I had been when I was a débutante. My portrait was published, parties were given for me, all my plans became of public importance. Mummy was delighted.

" 'It's highly unsatisfactory, but—— Oh, well, perhaps you couldn't have done better,' she said.

" 'I couldn't,' I comforted her.

" 'And the wedding won't be for a long time.'

" 'Next month.' I startled her. This was December. 'You don't believe in long engagements; neither do I.'

"As you know, we weren't married quite so quickly. Mummy wanted to make a social event of my wedding. The engraving of the cards would occupy a month and the making of my dress even longer. Mummy was determined that it must be a church wedding. At first she'd set her heart on its taking place in New York, 'a Fifth Avenue wedding for my only daughter.' To the last she tried to use me for advertising purposes. Daddy put a stop to that. He wanted some of his own friends to be present; they would all regret if they were compelled to make an unnecessary journey. So at last our wedding was arranged for March in the church where I was christened. Not till then did Daddy and

Mummy seem to realize what they'd let themselves in for. All of a sudden they became sentimental and clinging. Jeff and I didn't realize till long after—till we were on our honeymoon, to be precise. And, oh, how we did realize!" She wrinkles her nose impishly.

I glance at my watch.

"You're a spellbinder. I've barely time to dash down to the office. There'll be mail to be read and letters to sign."

"But you'll come back," she coaxes. "I'm in the mood for confession."

"Tell me one thing," I question, struggling into my coat. "Did Jeff's father come across?"

"Wouldn't you like to know? You'll learn that when you come back; it's a bribe. Here's the key to the apartment. You can let yourself in. I shan't have to get out of bed."

As I'm vanishing, she calls, "How long will you be gone?"

"Two hours."

I wasn't gone two hours. When I reached the office I found that my secretary, despairing of my putting in an appearance, had locked her desk and called it a day. Since there was nothing for me to do, I had a dinner packed for Mary and myself at a delicatessen store and arrived

back at Mildred Mansions post-haste to hear the rest of the story. Employing the key she had lent me, I admitted myself without formal warning. Being an hour earlier than my promise, I moved cautiously so as not to disturb her if she were dozing.

The hall was in darkness. I had placed my packages on a table, when I was aware of the murmur of voices. They came from Mary's bedroom. I peered round the passage. Her room was lighted. The door was part way open. She was still in bed. A man was bending over her, his back towards me. The doctor, perhaps; though she had made mention of no doctor. Then I saw the shining of her white arms, hugging him close, clasped about him.

I waited to see no more. Retreating in panic, I departed as noiselessly as I had entered.

But what to think of her? She's nine months married, out of which she's been three months deserted. Is she conducting a clandestine affair with a new lover?

THE FALL OF MARY ANGEL

WHY do men marry? Why do they desert their wives? Of the two insanities it is easier to understand the desertion than the nuptials. Mary Angel, child though she is, holds the clue to both riddles.

Before I meet her again, I am trying to do a little honest thinking. To a bachelor the resignations a bridegroom makes at the altar seems preposterously disproportionate to his gains. He endows the wraithlike creature at his side with all his worldly goods; in return she merely bestows herself—a gift which is more of a liability than an asset. He pledges her his affection for so long as she remains above ground. How can he do that truthfully, when he has no assurance as

to the changes time will work in her mind and body?

Stating the problem from another angle, how many husbands, if their case were not complicated by social considerations and children, would have the rashness to marry the same wife twice?

I am not striving to be cynical, but most of the married women of my acquaintance are lamentable failures, the chief reason for their failure being that they fancy themselves superior to the job of wifehood. Few of them have been educated. In default of mental interests, they allot to their relaxations the importance of occupations. They spend their energies massacring time. If they could run their homes as expertly as they play contract bridge, there would be some excuse for their existence. They don't. The cook in the kitchen is more worthy of adoration; she pulls her weight. They shirk motherhood by professing that the creative processes of nature degrade them to the level of human incubators. When they consent to bear children, they bear the minimum number that will appease their husbands—and delegate their upbringing to hirelings. If they were thrown on the streets tomorrow, they would possess less talent for

commanding a salary than a manicurist. If the Bolshevik principle were applied, that no one must consume who does not replace, they would starve to death as economically inefficient. Yet they flaunt themselves as queen bees. No one dares tell them that they are the unprofitable drones of the hive.

Whence do they muster the conceit to assume that man's sacred privilege is to slave for them? After forty they're not beautiful, yet they claim the prerogatives of the ravishing. Even the accomplishments they pretend to possess they practise badly. They dance without zest. Their information is gossip. To converse with them throughout a dinner is agony.

While these thoughts are provoked by Mary Angel, none of the criticisms apply to her. Without hope of reward, I would gladly bankrupt myself for Mary. I never approach her but she sets me dreaming. But one day you, too, will be forty, Mary Angel. When your physical charms have faded, what will you have to contribute—a game of bridge? My dear, I hate to tell you: a man regards any game with a double-chinned woman as the direst of penalties.

But this is Mary's story, not a bachelor's soliloquy.

I have not seen her for two days. I have been afraid to face her lest she may guess my suspicions. "Unto the pure all things are pure," is the justification for my actions; I am unwilling to share it with an intrusive stranger. Yet the man I glimpsed in her bedroom may have been a noble-minded fellow who, having learned of her indisposition, was proving his sympathy. I am reluctant to credit that a second man exists who is capable of visiting Mary Angel without temptation.

Put the case to yourself. She lives alone in an apartment. To be received by her you press a button and ascend in an elevator. Provided she is discreet, no one remarks the company she entertains. I pass in and out almost anonymously. It's all right for me; I knew her when she was in her cradle. For other men it is not safe. How to tell her?

On my desk when I returned this evening was a note, reproachful in its brevity: "*How about our collaboration?*" No resentment. If the meek actually did inherit the earth, Mary would own the half of Long Island. Scarcely touching my meal, I hurry to her.

I find her attired in a daffodil tea gown, her complexion becomingly pale; its pallor I am cer-

tain has been assisted with powder. "Not too hard on her," it seems to warn me; "she's still an invalid." Having admitted me, she flits back to the living room with its three staring windows in a line, smudged with night and stirred by the distant scurry of charging headlights. In the hall I remove my coat with the solemnity of a doctor about to perform an operation. Meanwhile, out of the corner of my eye, I see her composing herself on the couch, propping cushions behind her, spreading her draperies to leave sufficient of her slim legs showing. A shaded lamp has been placed so that its glow may kindle her to most advantage. Very touching! Very flattering! Cleopatra must have gone to these same pains on the Nile.

"So your cold is better?" I open negotiations.

"You've been staying away to punish me." She bites her lower lip and glances back across her shoulder.

"Nonsense, Mary. What reason have I to punish you?"

"Old jealous!" She clutches my sleeve. "The other night you saw him."

"How did you know?"

"How wouldn't I? You left the dinner you'd brought for us behind. How much did you see?"

"The outline of a man bending over you."

"You didn't recognize him?" She raises herself with sudden ecstasy. "Hurray! Then my story isn't spoiled. We can wait till we come to him. If you knew now who he was, it would ruin everything."

Shocked by her shamelessness, I thrust a hand in my breast, striking the favorite attitude of a ham actor.

"I realize that the concern I feel must seem absurd to you, who are so modern."

Her response is to squeal with laughter.

"You're too funny—too killing. You're dying with curiosity. Answer me something. If I were to land myself in such a mess that Jeff divorced me, would you come to the rescue? Hold hard before you commit yourself. What I'm meaning is would you marry me?"

"There are few things that I wouldn't do for you, Mary."

"Old darling!" She drags me down. "I've been as lonely as a mutt dog gone astray. Are you sometimes lonely?"

"Horribly."

"And afraid of not being wanted?"

"What's your game?"

"No game, Uncle Biff. Only that lying here

half ill, with no one caring, has made me sorry —sorry for myself, for you, for everybody. I've been examining my past and have placed my finger on my most damning indiscretion: all my life I've been too darned narrow. Narrow in my mind; I'm not pretending that I haven't kicked my legs a trifle high."

"So you're striving after broad-mindedness by allowing unaccompanied men to visit you in your bedroom?"

Again she peals into laughter.

"You at least seemed to like it."

"My dear child, I'm different."

"That's what they all claim." She wags her head. "But I'm serious, Uncle Biff. Virtue is its own reward. Florence Nightingale found that out; she died unmarried. Men don't want good girls. Even good men, like you, don't want them."

"I'll be frank with you, Mary; I don't enjoy you in this mood of naughtiness. Are you paying me back for having neglected you?"

"Nope. I guess I'm paying myself back. I hate myself so much that I'm longing to hear someone say, just to bring me comfort, even though he doesn't mean a word of it, 'Whatever happens to you, little Mary, I'll always stay by you.' "

"All my actions have said it," I remind her. "But Jeff made you that promise."

"Darling Jeff!" She switches irresponsibly.

"If you think so highly of him, how could he be such a pup——"

"Be quiet, or we'll quarrel."

She lies still as a violin in its case. That's the exact image for her. Capable of music, but silent.

I light a cigarette—offer her one, which she refuses. As I pace about, feigning to examine this and that, her eyes follow me.

"You distrust women," she accuses me. "Is it because you love us so frightfully?"

"This has gone too far, Mary." I seat myself at the end of the couch. She shifts her feet to make room for me. "If you refuse to tell me who this man is, let's get on with our collaboration. We'd reached the point where you'd become engaged and preparations were under way for your marriage."

"If there's one thing that ought to discourage people from toothache,"—she fixes wide eyes on me—"it's being mauled by a dentist."

"What has that to do with anything?"

"A whole lot. If there's one thing that ought to discourage a girl from becoming engaged, it's getting married."

"Don't catch your drift," I confess tersely.

She smiles.

"It's the commercialism of a wedding that's so disillusioning—the greed that prompts it. Having played the rôle of victim, I'd rather attend a funeral. Funerals are much gayer. A corpse's troubles are ended. At the sadder ceremony"—she produces a lipstick and applies it thoughtfully—"they're just beginning. A wedding is the 'Going-going-gone' of a maiden's auctioning. The voice that breathed o'er Eden is the fall of the hammer. 'She's yours, young fellow—a juicy chicken, but nothing like the bargain you fancy. Cart her away.' Her relatives tear off their masks. At last they can afford to be natural."

I pinch her toes in her pointed slippers, much as I used to when she was a baby.

"Congratulate me on being a bachelor."

"I won't. There's nothing the matter with marriage—never was. My complaint is against the fat-heads of your generation. Here's the most wonderful miracle that can happen to two mortals—so sacred that it ought to be whispered. A girl and a boy grow wings. And what do you elderly morons do? You make a peep-show of

them and invite Mr. World and his wife to gratify their prurient curiosity."

"Rot!"

"My dear man, allow me to know. You're not a girl and you've never been married. Parents with daughters stoop to the tricks of shysters. First they misrepresent the goods they have for sale. Then, when they've obtained an offer, they place the goods on exhibition and charge their friends a dozen soup plates to view them. Lastly, when a parson has blessed the deal, they thumb their noses at the poor suckers whom they've handcuffed."

"You're both bitter and vulgar."

"You bet I am. The whole of my generation's bitter and vulgar. We're your generation's crime. Mummy was certainly consistent; I'll hand her that. Having failed me all along the line on the presumption that she was being wise, she didn't let up till she'd plunged me off the deep end. Talk about the girl who took the wrong turning. I was that girl. Mummy had an unerring instinct for wrong turnings. If she caught me hesitating at a right one, she pushed me down a wrong one every time."

"You're making a grave mistake," I caution

her, "in harboring such soreness against your mother. If you were to put this into print, I don't think you would find anyone to sympathize with you. A judge who was summing up your case impartially would state the sequence of events somewhat as follows: You'd been introduced to society at considerable expense to your parents. Being an only child, you'd been given more favorable chances than most girls. You'd made no use of them. You'd run like a wild thing, snaring boys' hearts for the selfish pleasure of chucking them back at them. You couldn't have got away with such cruelty if your appearance hadn't belied you; you looked gentle and dainty. At last, when all your serious admirers had seen through you, you got to going with the tough eggs of your crowd, who considered bad manners sporting. You crashed a party in New York and made goo-goo eyes at a guest as unbidden as yourself. When you stumbled across him a week later, he was philandering with another man's wife."

"I 'fessed up to all that the other night," she interrupts, "and in words so damning that you objected. 'Dropping down the ladder rung by rung' was how I described my condition. But my meeting with Jeff brought redemption, white

robes, the Hallelujah Chorus. It was Christmas morning and the first day of spring rolled into one."

"That's special pleading. I'm summing up impartially," I squelch her. "On the strength of this sketchy acquaintance with a man encountered dishonestly and reëncountered under compromising circumstances, you informed your parents within twelve hours of their having learned of his existence, that wild horses couldn't prevent you from marrying him. In more sensible days, when women's opinions weren't consulted and the eldest male was the guardian of his family's honor, your father would have locked you up in a tower. In this woman-ruined age, all yours did was to insist that you avoid scandal by marrying your pick-up openly with a ceremony appropriate to your station. The palsied yes-artist—I refer to your father—couldn't have done less. Yet you lambaste him and your mother as a pair of torturers."

"How you do go on!"

With an effort I control my temper.

"Your ideas are so perverse, Mary, that with all the desire in the world to understand you, I don't even remotely glimpse your angle."

"Poor old dumb-bell!" She grins affectionately

as though she were handing me a compliment. "You will, though I expect you'll require a bit of massage. Now listen to my version. Here were Jeff and I worshiping each other, seeing ladders reaching up to heaven and clouds of angels ascending and descending. We'd become lyric lunatics. Our farthest thought was to coin a profit from our loving. All we asked was to be set free to live alone forever. To have our union made compulsory and proclaimed like a circus seemed blasphemous. It was treating Jeff as the tattooed man and me as the bearded lady."

"Two and two make four, Mary; they've never been known to make five. The trouble with you is that you expect a special dispensation permitting you to make them six or seven. It can't be done. Your efforts to ignore the arithmetic of life have landed you in your present mess. I suppose you would have preferred a trial mating and, if it didn't pan out, your tyrannous parents could adopt the baby."

"Any mating other than the kind that was flung at us would have been halfway decent. More love matches are mucked by society weddings, my uncle, than are dreamed of in your bachelor philosophy. A church wedding is a crude survival of paganism, which benefits

everybody but the two idiots chiefly concerned. Divorce courts are strewn with the débris of church weddings. Here's why—I appeal to your commonsense. The bride has been worked to death and sets out on her honeymoon peevish. The bridegroom has been garlanded and paraded as a sacrificial bull. He feels that he's been made to look foolish and blames his mother-in-law. There are only two things that a society wedding accomplishes: it boosts the vanity of the bride's parents and it spares their pockets. What I mean is that it passes round the hat to provide the happy couple with the least practical of their household furnishings."

Till this point I have cherished the hope that she is spoofing. It dawns on me that she is completely in earnest. The obsession of her ill usage is becoming a mania, which only the baldest assertion of facts can check.

"You talk like a person suffering from arrested development," I address her sternly. "You seem to have no elementary sense of moral responsibility. Everyone is to blame for your actions except yourself. If you were to repeat your story to a probation officer word for word as you've told it to me, he would require no further evi-

dence to have you committed to a refuge for female incorrigibles."

"You've said it." She endorses me wholeheartedly. "That's where most of the girls who are in society ought to be—under lock and key in the purer air of reformatories. The boys who run with them ought to be on state farms. Their parents ought to be in asylums for the demented. That provides for everybody, except bachelors and spinsters of over thirty. They've proved that they're well balanced by remaining single. As the only normal people left, it'll be their job to take care of us."

"Is this intended for a joke?" I ask.

"Far from it." She stretches herself luxuriously. "Honest Injun, I'm agreeing with you. I'm quite sure that reformatories for wayward girls are crowded with poor people's daughters who've done no worse than I've done. Only you see, I'm not a poor person's child—that's a difference. And I was forced to do what I've done —that's a second difference. I won't blame Mummy again, because that irritates you. I'll blame everyone in our kind of social environment who's rich enough to allow her daughters to grow up wasters and to turn her home into a night club. Lord, the stories I could tell! For instance,

a party's considered a flop if it isn't peppy. When a party threatens to become a flop, all the boys and girls buzz off without a thank-you. The best way to insure pep is to provide alcohol. I've known hostesses to leave whisky bottles in bathrooms so that the boys could tank up while they were checking their coats and hats. I'm not talking about men—I mean boys at prep. schools or in their first year at college. How about lacking a sense of moral responsibility? Who taught my generation to lack it—the mothers who thought a drunken gathering successful or the fathers who were nagged into procuring the liquor from their bootleggers?"

"Oh, well!" I admit weakly.

"It is 'oh, well!' " she pounces on me. "What's sauce for the goose, you know. Let's both face facts. Fathers who encourage other people's kids to become drunkards in order that their daughters' entertainments may be popular would sack an employee next morning who turned up the worse for wear. And their daughters aren't any the more popular—the thing that's popular is the poison that pours from the bottle."

Defeated by her more exact knowledge, "Let's go back to the point at which this digression started," I suggest. "You made the extravagant

statement that church weddings are the first step on the road to the divorce court. May I remind you that the purpose of a church ceremony is to emphasize the religious aspect of marriage?"

"Is that so?" She scalds me with contempt. "Then why is it made the pretext for wholesale blackmailing? I wouldn't like to tell you how many invitations I addressed to people so little our acquaintance that to-day I couldn't recognize them from a hole in the ground. Jeff's mother handed us a list of her supposed friends as long as the Hudson River. It's my belief she bought a copy of *Who's Who In America* and selected every other name from A to Z. That started the vulgarest competition you ever witnessed between our two families, Jeff's and mine, as to which could pretend to be on speaking terms with the most notorieties. If my mother invited the President of the United States, Jeff's mother added the Prince of Wales to her list of intimates. They were like a pair of kids boasting. As far as I can remember, only God was omitted. Cards engraved by Tiffany, announcing the approaching nuptials of the tattooed man to the bearded lady, were sent to dukes, earls, moving-picture actresses, and the few remaining crowned heads of Europe. Morning, noon, and night,

when I ought to have been with Jeff, I scribbled addresses and licked stamps. I can still taste the gum and the ink on my aching fingers. When I believed I was approaching the end, Jeff's mother would submit a new wad of titles; then Mummy would retort with another wad even more imposing. How those two women grew to hate each other! When I complained I was told, 'The more people, the more presents.' So for this, too, as for every other wrong turning, I had to pretend to be grateful."

"I'm certain you're misrepresenting motives, Mary."

She kicks off a slipper which just avoids my head.

"You really are an old idiot." She jabs me with her stockinged foot. "You fall over backwards to believe the best of your generation. In-laws are malicious. You can't blame them. It's human nature. They feel that their property rights are being invaded. Affections which have been theirs peculiarly since childhood are going to be shared. All their shabby little secrets which they've guarded so carefully are going to be handed on to strangers. They resent the boy and girl who have brought about these complications. As an act of self-protection, long before the marriage,

they begin to chase the culprits from the camp. From the moment I was engaged I was made to feel that I was a spy in the pay of the enemy—I'd lost my parents' confidence. I was no longer their daughter; I was a boarder."

"You were high-strung and over-sensitive."

"No." She rolls her head in denial. "I've accused Mummy of heaps of misguiding; but I will say this for her—she was fond of me. So was Daddy, in a far less selfish way which he'd never been allowed to express. Now that all the window-dressing and placing me on the map had at last won me a prospective husband, they were terror-stricken at what they'd done. They invented any excuse to separate me from Jeff that they might keep me to themselves. Jeff's family did the same as far as he was concerned. I'm certain that if either his parents or mine could have busted the match, they'd have tossed their hats over the moon. Mummy was continually asking me the sort of questions which planted doubts.

"What sort of questions?"

"The sort that made me wonder whether they'd ferreted out something discreditable and didn't dare tell me. It was only when I compared notes with Jeff and found that his mother was up to the same pranks, that—— But where's the

use? Jeff and I were like soldiers in opposing trenches, who met by stealth in No Man's Land."

"But why?"

"You must be dense. Money was at the bottom of it. Jeff's father was playing the waiting game. He hadn't committed himself to anything. He hadn't even promised to continue Jeff's allowance. He smiled benevolently, but he kept his hands in his pockets. My people, since I was the bride, were compelled to spend. They hoped that by appearing lavish they might shame Jeff's father into doing something handsome. He approved of all our arrangements, but he volunteered nothing. The irritation mounted. Everything became a target for criticism: the hats Jeff's mother wore, which were patterned on Queen Mary's; the smallness of my engagement ring—everything. You can't imagine."

"You say money was at the root of the trouble. Jeff's father, Mr. Stanhope, was rich."

"That was the report Daddy had of him in his dossier—or rather that he was presumed to be rich. Mummy, you must remember, had always planned to marry me to money. But there was a doubt about Mr. Stanhope. He had a bad habit of putting his name on the notes of friends. On the other hand Jeff assured me that his father

was worth several millions. He'd never found the least difficulty in extracting money from him. 'Dad, I'm hard up.' And Dad would shell out anything from a hundred to three hundred dollars. But let's leave Jeff's people for the moment.

"Mummy was determined to set an example of munificence, however the Stanhopes acted. Their turn to support me would come later. Having brought me up like a princess, she was going to polish me off like a princess. She chose a French house in New York to make my wedding gown because it had the power to get my bridal portrait into the papers. When I wasn't licking envelopes I was being fitted. Mummy gloried in the publicity. She gloried in heaping coals of fire on the Stanhopes' heads.

" 'Well, there's one thing,' she consoled herself; 'neither I nor your Daddy need meet them again when once you've started on your honeymoon. It's too ridiculous that I should be a mother-in-law with that Stanhope woman. People could mistake me for her daughter, with her armor-plated gowns.'

"Poor Mummy, as you're aware, has the youth complex. In her heart she believed that she was

the one who ought to have been getting married. A son-in-law was a milestone—almost a tombstone. A woman old enough to possess a son-in-law can't kid herself that she looks young enough to pass for thirty. Moreover, there was worse to come; within a year she might find herself a grandmother. Were that to happen, she would only make herself a laughing-stock with her beautifying pilgrimages to Vichy. You see, Mummy's great mistake was the mistake of which you accuse me: she couldn't add correctly —her arithmetic of life was wrong. She'd moved heaven and earth to get me married, but she'd forgotten that when she made me a wife she'd be making herself a middle-aged woman. Poor dear Mummy, like me and all spoilt women, she thought it cruel that she couldn't eat her cake and have it.

"So for a variety of reasons smothered hatreds spread and smoldered. On the surface, however, our two families were hypocritically united. Each boasted about the other's influence, high connections, and financial importance. Mummy referred to Jeff as a rising young stock broker. *Rising* was right, since he was earning thirty per. Jeff's mother introduced me to her friends

as the heiress to the fortune of the rich Harry Angel. Her words conveyed that meaning though they didn't state it explicitly.

" 'But wasn't their engagement tremendously sudden?' some tactless person would ask.

"For an engagement to happen suddenly isn't reckoned respectable. So a legend had to be invented. Mummy was its originator. The reason other suitors had never stood a chance with me was that Jeff and I had been secretly engaged almost from the night of my coming-out. Of course, when the lie had been told, I had to subscribe to it. I wasn't a bit ashamed of how I'd become engaged. To have to lie made me feel shabby."

I shrug my shoulders.

"My dear Mary, the truth would have sounded rather shabby."

"I wish you'd view the situation through my eyes." Her voice becomes querulous. "Why must you pick holes in me? I was longing to be sincere as never before in my life. I found myself drowning in a rising tide of falsity. All Mummy's attitudes were artificial. I was in love—that was the one fact to which she attached no importance. She attached so little importance to it that dressmakers' fittings, wedding announcements,

almost any triviality took precedence over getting to know Jeff better. When he came to the house it was to find me so busy that I had hardly time to spare on him. If I snatched a few minutes, Mummy made a threesome of a twosome. Let me tell you, since you're a bachelor, that to play a threesome at courting is a darned sight more irritating than to play it at golf. Directly you start to do any cuddling there's always someone behind you yelling, 'Fore!' When I expostulated with her she explained that an engaged man alone with his baby-doll wasn't to be trusted. Having paid a deposit, he might get to sampling. If the sample didn't come up to expectations he might cancel negotiations. That was why she was clothing me with mystery—treating me as a rare volume after having permitted any chance reader to thumb me. I couldn't get her angle and said so.

" 'Most engagements are broken,' she replied, 'through too much pre-nuptial familiarity. If you allow him to know you as well as I do, he won't want you.' "

Mary bumped me with her stockinged foot.

"You're staring into space. Am I boring you?"

"Not at all, Mary. You're only destroying the day dreams of a bachelor. I was thinking how

different your account of an engagement is from anything I'd imagined."

"Pray, what did you imagine, you idealistic old donkey?"

"Kisses, orange blossoms, wedding bells." I grimace.

"They come later." She brushes the bobbed hair from her eyes. "The next thing that occupied my attention was presents. They all had to be catalogued and little gushing notes of gratitude hurried off."

"Why catalogued?" I ask.

"The very question I put to Mummy. You'll grin at her answer. It throws a searchlight on what cynical affairs weddings are. She said that a catalogue was necessary so that there might be no dispute as to which presents had come from my friends and which from Jeff's."

"I call that looking for trouble," I object. "To dispute over who gave you your presents, you'd have to be hard up for a quarrel."

"Silly—you're missing the point," she snubs me. "Mummy was long-headed. I wasn't married yet; she was taking precautions in case I should be divorced. The catalogue would compel Jeff, if ever we separated, to divide things fairly.

But don't interrupt; I'm anxious to get over this part of my story.

"As the presents arrived, Mummy pounced on them like a hawk on chickens. Those from Jeff's friends were scrutinized carefully. If they hadn't been bought at Fifth Avenue stores they were held up to contempt. One might have supposed that the sole purpose of marrying was to wheedle presents—that a girl's bestowing of her body and soul on a man was a means to an end. And how inappropriate even the best of the presents were! Dozens of plates costing hundreds of dollars. Silver trays and services. Cut crystal. Gifts that presumed a gang of highly trained servants to clean and polish them. Fine linen which, if it were kept in constant use, would occupy an expert laundress several days a week to wash and iron it. I have my faults; but I'm not avaricious. I simply wasn't interested. The only reason I was marrying was Jeff. I hadn't looked a day beyond the honeymoon."

"Hell!" I exclaim and beg her pardon. "I'd rather have eloped than have gone through with it."

"Good for you!" She darts into sitting posture. "That's the first sensible word you've spoken. Jeff found me one evening bleary-eyed with

scribbling notes of thanks. Against Mummy's protests he kidnaped me. The moment we were in the car, he trod on the gas.

" 'This has got to stop.'

"Too raging for words, he drove clear out into the country. When I tried to speak to him he paid me no attention. He kept his eyes on the road as if he couldn't bear the sight of me. Wounding—I'll say it was! Within a week we would be man and wife. I hadn't done a thing to offend him. Already he was blaming me.

"I'll never forget that drive. It was a bleak March evening with a melancholy touch of spring in the air—fields sodden, scarcely a sign of greenness, daylight fading. I could feel Jeff hating me. Anger made him handsome. If he'd seized me by the throat I'd have blessed him for the compliment. His not desiring to touch me was the hardest thing to bear. Turning into a lane where there wasn't a house for miles, he jammed on the brakes.

" 'What's the great idea?' he snapped viciously. 'If I've got the smallpox, you'll catch the contagion on the honeymoon.'

"He was cruel and babyish. He didn't care a damn whether I replied or remained silent. He'd collected a list of grievances as long as your arm.

Gee! I was sorry for him. They were the same grievances that I've been voicing to you, only he phrased them heaps more vigorously. What the hell did he care about a public wedding and a lot of fools craning their necks at him? I was the person he was marrying—not my family. When he'd asked me to marry him he hadn't considered whether my parents were Zulus or Hottentots. Gosh! If winning me meant that he had to take orders from that female sergeant-major, his future mother-in-law, he would prefer to remain single forever. Whose wedding was this, anyhow? What the dickens did my mother think he'd do to me if we were left alone for a second? Within a week I was going to be left alone with him for fifty years. If he were so dishonorable that he couldn't be trusted with me now, why trust him when he'd have a legal right to abuse me?

" 'Or perhaps you're the one she doesn't trust,' he surprised me. 'Lord knows, I never supposed you were a shrinking violet.'

"You see he'd learned about the boys I'd jilted —my hundred and one flirtations.

" 'Now that you're engaged to a man who wouldn't hurt a hair of your head, what's the fool notion of sticking you in a show case? The

time to have locked you up was when you were running like a cat on the tiles.'

"He wasn't flinging my past at me, he assured me. It cut no ice with him how I'd acted before we met. His mother was the mischief maker who'd nosed out all the dirt. That wasn't the point. The point was that from the moment he'd expressed his intention to become my husband, my people had treated him as a crook who was trying to steal what didn't belong to him.

"I had it on the tip of my tongue to remind him that that was how his own parents had treated me. He saved me the trouble.

" 'Jealousy—that's at the root of it. My people are nearly as bad. As long as I lived at home they didn't want me to be serious. I was their amusement. I played patience with my mother and beau-ed her to the theaters. I was my father's side-kick when he couldn't find a partner for golf. If I had been keen on a job, I couldn't have been at their beck and call. I was always given to understand that Dad earned plenty of money for all of us, so my work was considered a joke. That's all changed now.'

"He paused for me to ask him how it was changed. I stared into the dusk, too weepy to be curious.

" 'It's hell getting married on a shoestring,' he stormed on; 'we're both ignorant of whether we can afford it. For myself I don't care; it's of you I'm thinking. Our two old men are standing pat like a pair of poker players. God knows what they hold in their hands—a pair of twos or four aces. They're each waiting for the other to bid first. They'll make goats of us if we don't watch.'

"Having got that off his chest he sat quiet for a spell. He looked such a silly little boy that I slipped my arm round his neck.

" 'Jeff, darling!'

" 'I guess love's fine to read about,' he grunted; 'but the world's full of cheats and stinkers.'

" 'Meaning me?'

"I dived for the door. I'd left the car and was hurrying down the muddy lane when he came dashing after me.

" 'What ever put that into your head?' His lips were gummed to mine. 'I've been starving for you.'

"He wanted to elope. Great minds think alike. That was your solution. I canned his suggestion. We would gain nothing by affronting our parents. If we allowed them to believe that they

were managing us, they would have to foot the bill for the privilege.

" 'Only one week more of tyranny,' I pleaded.

" 'Tyranny's right,' he growled. 'Once we're married, they'll have to lay off.'

"We returned to the car—it was the one dry spot in sight—and seated ourselves on the running board. Between bouts of love-making he sketched for me his autobiography, which except for the difference of sex was much the same as mine. Funny—wasn't it?—that the first chance I had really to know him was a week before the honeymoon. His character, he asserted, had been weakened by subsidizing. To get their own way his parents had bribed him with lavish tips. He'd been drugged into a false security by the supposition that his father's affluence was his own. He'd had the use of servants, horses, automobiles —none of which belonged to him. Too late he'd awakened to the fact that not a solitary thing that created his appearance of prosperity belonged to him. Worse still, he'd been trained to do nothing practical. You couldn't hire yourself out on the plea that you were a gentleman. While he'd been treating life as a holiday, the sons of sweatshop workers had been studying special courses at Columbia, burning the midnight oil,

sacrificing to accumulate knowledge. They'd required no one to tell them that life was a battle, which was what it was. His father had delayed to tear the bandage from his eyes till he was on the point of marrying. Now he was full of niggardly maxims, 'Cutting one's garment according to the cloth'—muck of that sort. He'd been grossly unfair if, after having educated his son to expensive tastes and placed him in a position to marry a girl with tastes equally expensive, he proposed to wash his hands of him. If from the start that had been his intention, he ought to have apprenticed him to a trade."

"But what did you have to say, Mary Angel?"

"Now what would I? Be yourself. Everybody gets an attack of nerves before marriage. If I'd taken him seriously I might have lost him. I soothed him, of course, with the assurance that both our fathers were bound to come across. For their pride's sake, after having spent a fortune on our wedding, they couldn't let us exist on a less sum than they paid their chauffeurs.

"The moon was rising. You know what the moon does to lovers. It did it to us. We talked ourselves into a delirious mood of optimism. 'All in the wild March morning we heard the angels call'—if it wasn't morning, the hour was long

past midnight when Jeff returned me to my doorstep.

"Mummy and Daddy were both sitting up for us with a pile of verbal brickbats—the first time it had ever happened. Mummy had worked herself into a panic. 'What will the neighbors think?' I might have retorted, 'Nothing worse than they've thought a thousand times before.' Sharp words followed in which Jeff was informed that if the wedding announcements hadn't been sent out our engagement would have been cancelled. His reply was that a few printed cards shouldn't be allowed to weigh against my future happiness. He accused Mummy there and then of doing everything for appearances. Daddy called him an impertinent jackanapes. The fight was on. The mud slung was appalling.

"Suddenly Mummy turned her guns on me—hoses rather than guns, squirting sentiment. She begged me before it was too late to consider whether Jeff was the proper man to whom to entrust my happiness.

" 'You've had so many passing fancies,' she urged tactlessly. 'Marriage isn't a flirtation. It's a sacrament ordained by God.'

"Probably you've noticed, Uncle Biff, how mothers invariably drag God into a discussion

when they want to bolster a shaky argument. The divine right of mothers! They never fail to appeal to it when they're cornered. She of all persons had no license to adopt this lofty tone. Marriage for her had been a meal-ticket. In trying to separate me from Jeff because she'd quarreled with him, she must have known she was being wicked. She'd encouraged me in my flirtations; it was hypocritical of her to let me down before Jeff by recalling them. Nevertheless, because she'd struck a holier-than-thou attitude, she was convinced that she'd made a fine impression. She followed up her advantage by warning me that a man who before marriage could high-hat the woman who bore me was capable of showing me even less respect when he'd got me in his power.

" 'Rot!' Daddy intervened sensibly. 'What I do say, Mary, is that if you have any doubts in your mind, it's easier to get rid of a fiancé than a husband.'

" 'She has so few doubts,' Jeff glared at him, 'that we almost eloped this evening.'

"He drew me into his arms.

" 'Let them yelp, darling.'

"The moment he was gone a lecture commenced on the responsibilities and obligations of

matrimony. Had I foreseen that we might have children? I replied that if I hadn't I'd be an imbecile. All right then. But had I foreseen that in choosing a life's partner I was marrying his family?

"I cut the lecture short by pleading a headache.

"Next morning everyone rose ashamed and sorry. While we were looking down our noses and hoping for a reconciliation, Jeff did the handsome thing. He called while we were still at breakfast and apologized. In the afternoon Mr. and Mrs. Stanhope put in an appearance. Daddy was phoned to return post-haste from the office. Tea was served. Compliments flew. The only reference to what had occurred was Mrs. Stanhope's 'Young people are liable to become so excited.' They were all afraid of scandal if the match were broken off. At last they'd stumbled on one emotion that united them. After a round of gossip, Mummy suggested that Mr. Stanhope and Daddy should retire to the study where their privacy would be uninterrupted.

"I can still see Mr. Stanhope's expression as he was shooed up the stairs—benevolent, unwilling and tomcattish. I can see his expression an

hour later when he descended—genial, wary, and still tomcattish. Suave old boys of his sort can get away with murder. He was sympathetic as an undertaker. You couldn't guess whether he'd been attending a christening or laying out a corpse.

"My future parents-in-law embraced me at departing, saying that already they considered me their daughter. The door had scarcely closed when Mummy was questioning Daddy.

" 'How much?'

"Daddy blinked.

" 'He promised to do what was just. Said Jeff had been pampered; that he had confidence in him, but was reluctant to cramp his efforts.'

" 'Passing the buck! Well, if he fancies we're going to support his son——'

"I ducked into my bedroom and heard no more."

"One minute," I halt her. "You accused your mother a while ago of trying to eat her cake and have it. Seems to me, young lady, that's what you and Jeff were doing. You engaged yourselves without consulting anybody's convenience. You led off in a high-handed manner, as though you were self-sufficient and prepared to face the consequences. Having entangled everybody, it

turned out that you weren't as independent as you'd fancied; you expected the parents whose authority you'd flouted to finance you."

"And why not?" she pounces on me. "Surely our parents owed us some sort of reparation. They'd brought us into the world without our asking. They'd subordinated us to their pleasures. They'd neglected our interests as much as was possible. They'd accustomed us to luxuries till they'd become our necessities. If we were performing dogs, they'd taught us our tricks. For the first time in selecting each other, we'd decided without them. That was what made them sore; but it didn't give them the privilege to disown responsibility for us."

"I'm afraid, my dear,"—I cough apologetically—"you don't regard these matters from a man's viewpoint. We'll leave you out of the picture. Consider Jeff. He was well aware that his resources didn't entitle him to marry you. If he couldn't support a wife of your social station, it wasn't manly of him to have asked you. On thirty dollars a week he ought not to have aspired to a stenographer."

"What a class-ridden old ass you are!" she cuts me short. "The poor devil couldn't help himself; he was wild about me."

"I've been wild to own a Rolls-Royce," I try a touch of humor.

"Jeff naturally fell in love with a girl in his social circle," she rushes on. "Naturally, having fallen in love, he was mad to marry. It was unreasonable to expect that at his age he could earn the salary of a man past forty. His father would have to leave him his money some day; he couldn't take it with him to the grave. He'd placed his son in an utterly false position, if ——" She doesn't give herself time to finish the sentence. "And the same applies to my parents. If they all disowned us for doing something for which our hearts and bodies were created, they made our loving shameful and punished us with squalor."

"Go easy," I get a word in. "The proof of the pudding's in the eating. You've not been married a year—and where is Jeff? Was your parents' instinct against this man right or was it not?"

"It was not." She smiles triumphantly. "From start to finish Jeff was on the level—which is a darned sight more than I can say for your generation. Here's how white his conduct was: You must remember that his father had conferred with my father, but that he himself had

never been given a proper chance to discuss ways and means with Daddy. Our elders had been determined to manage everything and to treat us as a pair of incompetents. They'd managed so brilliantly that with the wedding six days distant they were still haggling, each afraid to pledge assistance lest he'd let the other off. The evening following Mr. Stanhope's visit Jeff demanded an interview with Daddy and made a clean breast of his prospects: the sum he was earning; the three thousand allowance from home that he was receiving. To this he added that to the best of his belief his father was several times a millionaire, so that a little extra generosity wouldn't hurt him. He was honest in hinting that he'd counted on my family to continue my pin money.

"Daddy didn't return his frankness. It was for Mr. Stanhope to open the bidding by sweetening the pot. He read Jeff a lecture on what was usual under such circumstances. The bridegroom's father was the person who should declare his hand. He ought to buy his son a partnership, etc. A man in his position couldn't be asked to hand over his daughter on the strength of a lot of guff."

"That clinched matters?" I suggest.

"How little you know about human nature!" she scorns me. "Daddy should have taken this strong attitude long before. He'd been outmaneuvered. The house was jammed with wedding presents. We'd have to send them all back if the engagement was broken off."

"Humph!" I hide my mouth behind my hand. "So it's your Daddy's turn to be blamed? I've been wondering whether he'd be allowed any say at all. This is the first time you've mentioned that his wishes were consulted."

"They never were." Mary gives a hard little laugh. "I never remember that he was consulted at any time, till Mummy by her bossing had ditched the cart. Then she'd become pathetically weak and feminine. This time it was too late to pick up the pieces.

"I'll say this for Mummy; she realized how she'd bungled. In my last week at home she did her best to make amends. There wasn't a day when she didn't bring me peace offerings—pictures off the wall, odd bits of furniture, her personal jewelry. I hated taking them. She stripped herself. I guessed that an uneasy conscience prompted her. And here's the joke: while I was piling up possessions I hadn't an idea where I would find my next shelter. The amount and

source of our married income being undecided, there seemed to be no sense in hunting a house or apartment when we weren't certain whether we could pay the first month's rent.

"Nevertheless, the flinging away of money continued. Detectives slept in the house to guard the presents. New York caterers submitted their estimates. Bootleggers dumped champagne and whisky at the back door. A florist was commissioned to decorate the church to the tune of several thousand dollars. A harpist and a minor luminary of the Metropolitan Grand Opera were engaged to make a cheerful noise unto the Lord. Appearances were to be kept up till the last shot. No matter what happened afterward, we were to be given a royal send-off."

"Seeing that you weren't sure of a roof to cover you," I remark shrewdly, "I should think your parents would have acted more wisely by handing you the cash and curtailing the extravagance."

"Again you're missing the point, Unkie. This final burst of fireworks was a form of blackmail, on a par with despatching wedding invitations in order to coax presents. It was intended to shame the Stanhopes so that their meanness

wouldn't have a leg to stand on. Having seen their son married in such splendor, they would simply have to cough up."

"I hope it gave them the most violent sort of moral bilious attack."

"Hope springs eternal. If ye have tears to shed, provide yourself with a large-sized bath towel. We approach the last night of my stainless maidenhood."

"Then approach it quickly," I advise. "When the clock strikes midnight, I approach my pajamas."

"Well, my last night, pitiful to relate, was like all the events that preceded it—hectic. I wasn't to be given time to collect my senses. Someone threw a dinner and dance for the bridal party. I didn't arrive home till the small hours of the morning. As I placed my key in the latch, having bidden Jeff good-night, I suddenly realized that as a single girl I was doing this for the last time. At the head of the stairs stood Daddy, just as he'd always stood and would never stand again, waiting for me. It came over me how selfishly I'd used him. I suppose I became hysterical, for I hurled myself into his arms. He tried to comfort me, inquiring what was the trouble. He

even accused himself, saying that he'd been a careless daddy. Poor darling, it never occurred to him that I'd been a careless daughter.

" 'I'll never play hide-and-seek with you again,' I sobbed. 'I'm going to be an old woman.'

"Mummy, coming out on the landing in her dressing gown, overheard my words. She thought she knew what was the matter. Having tucked me safely in bed, she began a bewildering sex monologue on all the things young brides ought to know. I hardly knew any of them, but pretended I did. I was too weary to seek enlightenment. The only part I remember was that I was not to burden myself with children. A lot of good that did me! I hadn't the faintest notion how not to have them. So Mummy's eleventh-hour repentance was another wrong turning; her idea of being wise for me was to urge me to cheat my husband. Then Daddy was permitted to enter and kiss me.

"Next day—— But you were present. After all the futile bargaining, there was a great calm —religion, solemnity, the church carpeted with flowers, the organ booming 'Here comes the bride,' the congregation staring pop-eyed. Hypocrisy!"

"I disagree as to the hypocrisy." My sense of

reverence is offended. "I must say you brought to marriage blurred views of existence."

"Then pray how did my wedding impress you?" she demands ecstatically.

"To me, my dear child, the scene is unforgettable—two young creatures standing among the lilies before the altar, imploring God's blessing on the union of their hearts. Treacheries which have happened since cannot efface the effect of sacredness. You looked spiritual as the name you were exchanging. I never refer to you as Mary Stanhope. You will never be less to me than Mary Angel."

"Very sweet of you." She pats my bald spot. "But of course you realize that it was all stage-managed. Everything was eye-wash. It was a climax to the game of bluff that our two families had been playing. I wanted to giggle; its insincerity was so apparent. Thousands and thousands squandered to create an appearance of generosity and not a cent to spare for us—not even to hire an apartment. Then the reception that followed—the world and his wife getting tight on bootlegged bubbly. Fathers of families reviving cynical memories of their own honeymoons and leering at me. Old beaux whom I'd rejected wishing me good luck and mentally cal-

culating their chances were I to become a widow. Sick of being paraded, I collared Jeff and whispered, 'Let's escape.'

"Upstairs we changed in a panic, lest anything should occur to hinder us. I ripped my wedding gown in my haste and left it crumpled on the floor, a symbol of my banished personality. Whoever chose could pick it up; I had no further use for it. We felt like hares for whom the hounds were waiting. If they got wind of our intentions the chase would commence. A tap startled us. An envelope was thrust beneath the door. It was marked *With Dearest Love From Daddy.* I tossed it into my suitcase unopened. That Daddy hadn't attempted to enter proved to me that I was married.

"Most of our baggage had been placed in the car beforehand. To avoid the usual horseplay of old shoes and confetti we'd arranged with the chauffeur to join him in the garage. Sneaking out through the kitchen, we made our getaway, bidding no one, not even our parents, good-bye. So they went on killing the fatted calf, undisturbed by the knowledge that we had departed.

"In the car our only thought was that we were beyond interference and that our fun was beginning. To be free to give ourselves to each

other, with no one to bargain as to price, atoned for everything unpropitious that had marred our courting.

" 'You'll succeed now you have me, Jeff.' I uttered the promise with the fervor of a prophecy.

"I won't bother you with the raptures of our honeymoon—only the barest facts. You're getting restless for your pajamas, and all honeymoons are alike. We had made no plans further than our first night in New York. We hadn't been able to make plans through not knowing how much we would have to spend. In the hotel bedroom, while unpacking, I ran across Daddy's envelope. That reminded Jeff that he also had received an envelope from his father. We opened them together. The most beautiful moment of our lives depended on their contents. Mine contained a check for five hundred dollars and a scribbled note from Daddy, 'Sorry I couldn't make it larger.' Jeff's contained no note—merely six bills. You couldn't guess their total amount if I gave you a dozen chances. There were four tens and two fives—in all, fifty. I was so sorry for him that I rushed him my check to cash.

" 'You keep it. Nothing is mine—everything is ours now.'

" 'With five hundred and fifty, plus what I've brought, things might be gloomier.' He adopted a cheerful attitude.

"We decided to go south and chose Pinehurst for the sake of the golf." She pulls an impish face. "I know now how much a honeymoon costs; I didn't then. Jeff did all the paying; he hid his anxieties from me. Both of us having lived at home, fed by the ravens as it were, were complete innocents at estimating how far money will stretch. But Jeff was learning fast. Night and morning, often during meals, he made frowning calculations in a little notebook which he carried in his pocket. He never refused me any extravagance, and to be on the level I was careless about spending as Mummy. He amused me by the way he silently worried and suffered.

"We'd been at Pinehurst three weeks when he received a telegram.

" 'Read that. It's in answer to one I sent.'

"Taking it from him I read, *'I didn't ask you to get married.'*

"In reply to my questions he explained that we'd exhausted our resources and he'd applied to his father.

" 'We'll get a different answer when I apply to mine,' I encouraged him.

"The telegram I despatched was, '*Broke to the wide. A thousand very welcome.*'

"My reply came in the form of a letter addressed to the hotel management, stating that Harry Angel would settle all outstanding bills for us. Enclosed were our return fares and a bunch of press notices describing the magnificence of our wedding—the latter evidently had been stuck in by Mummy. There wasn't a line that was personal.

" 'It looks like the return of the prodigals.' Jeff rubbed his forehead.

" 'More than looks like,' I pouted. 'But wait till I see Daddy. I can always win him.' "

"And did you?" I ask.

"Leave that till next time." She springs from the couch. "If you don't go, you'll be late for your pajamas."

As I hunt for my coat and hat, I address her.

"As far as I can make out, in your opinion nothing that your elders ever did was right."

"Not much." She scans me gravely. "They did right things in the wrong places and wrong things in the wrong places. They seldom did either wrong or right things in the right places."

I hang on the threshold reluctantly. At the

back of my mind something's worrying me. Then I remember.

"By the way, Mary, about the man who visits you——"

Contrary to my expectations, her face wreathes in smiles.

"You're greedy. Leave something for next time."

Gently, but determinedly, she pushes me from her apartment into the public passage. Her door closes.

MARY BECOMES AN OUTCAST ANGEL

MARY warned me at the start that if I joined her in this collaboration I was due for the deep end. What she failed to foresee was that if the deep end claimed me, we should both take the plunge tied, as it were, in a sack together. I have reason to believe that we are being spied on by people eager to attribute a vile significance to our innocent association.

Ridiculous, of course! I need no one to remind me that Mary is half my years; she pays homage to my few gray hairs by bestowing on me the purely honorary title of uncle. Unfortunately, to have been called uncle by a young lady is no disproof of guilt in a divorce court. Men are as liable as women to the emotional brainstorm

which has been termed "the second blooming." Were I to be accused of blooming a second time with Mary, many of my actions would lend color to the interpretation.

To discover where I stand, I am attempting to take a dispassionate view of the situation. I am forty and over. Between forty and fifty respectable men, even more than rakes, are prone to make sentimental asses of themselves. Since their urge is to persuade themselves that they are still youthful, they rarely select maiden aunts to assist them in making whoopee. The lyric concerning rabbits applies equally to chickens —"Some like 'em tender, some like 'em tough." Middle-aged knights-errant who establish love-nests invariably prefer their chickens tender— so I labor under no illusion that I could clear myself by pleading that Mary might pass for my daughter.

Someone, I am convinced, is interested in gathering data for blackening Mary's character. On the last two occasions when I have approached her apartment house, I have been compelled to postpone my visit. How often the same thing has occurred without my noticing I cannot say; but these two times an automobile cruised behind me, accommodating its pace to

mine. The last time I swung round to confront my pursuer. That he wasn't anxious to be recognized was evident. Wheeling about, he trod on the gas and escaped before I could catch a glimpse of his features.

My conjecture is that her in-laws, the Stanhopes, have put detectives on my track. No one does that in the hope of hearing any good about you. If they're trailing me, they must be trailing her. Perhaps they, too, have learned of the anonymous man whose traces I have discovered in her apartment. If my guess is correct, then her precious husband, whom she defends so magnanimously, is planning to be rid of her.

How to protect her? She's indiscreet to the point of insolence. Perhaps she's too vain to credit that anyone could think ill of her. Perhaps she's morally so near-sighted that she doesn't perceive her direction. One thing is certain—she lacks the imagination to relate causes to their future effects. When disasters arise which her own negligence has planned, she is honestly horrified. Her first instinct is to blame somebody. Were I to tell her that she is watched, I might develop a persecution mania. Her continual attacks on the older generation as personified by

her mother indicate that such a mania would not require much stimulating.

I refuse to soil our relations by warning her. There's a back street runs behind Mildred Mansions and a back entrance used by tradesmen. By employing it I can outwit detectives and she will be none the wiser. The solution isn't dignified, but the alternative is to leave her brooding on my absence for interminable, unbroken hours.

The phone is ringing. As I expected, it's Mary inquiring, in the humble child's voice she adopts, how she has offended.

"Days long as months, Uncle Biff, since I've seen you."

I promise that I'll be round within the hour.

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Having stolen in by the tradesmen's entrance, I avoid the elevator and climb the many stairs. No one's in the corridor. I press her bell impatiently and slip inside the moment the door is opened.

"You're as winded as if you'd been running," she reproaches me. "You must be more careful; you're not as young as you were."

Patronizing references to my age invariably annoy me. To distract her I fly off at a tangent.

"Mary Angel, I've been pondering all you've told me. I've come to a conclusion."

"Bully for you." She pats her spit-curls. "I adore to hear myself discussed. But you're wheezing like a punctured cab horse. Give yourself time to get your breath."

"I've come to the conclusion," I continue pantingly, "that your gravest folly has been that you underestimate your charm. There aren't two girls of your fascination born in a century. You never needed to stand nonsense from any man. You never needed to be marketed. You never needed to grab at a pair of pants and rush them to the altar as if you were afraid you might lose them."

"But darling," her mood is caressing, "one always has to grab the one and only pair of pants which she cares to live with forever."

"Jeff isn't living with you forever," I refute her. "The dirty dog has absconded. It's time you woke up to your superlative values. Directly you enter a room the queue begins to form. You flung yourself at Jeff as though he were the widow's last chance. God knows how you regard him in the light of what's happened. I'm trying to tell you that you make a great mistake in burying yourself. Jeff's a closed book. You've

nothing of which to be ashamed. He was only a week-end guest. The world is at your disposal."

"Flatterer!" She stays me, wagging a reproving finger. "You're hysterical as the smut-sheet of a Sunday magazine section. Once I thought as you do—that I was a white doe, utterly more precious than any other in the herd. One touch of marriage makes the whole world democratic. So don't encourage me to give myself airs. This is an age of virgin-worship. Men regard me as shop-soiled. I'm on the bargain counter."

" 'Ah Christ! if only I had known, known, known,' " I mutter.

"What's that?" she questions. "You're quoting. When you quote, tears always flood your eyes."

"It's from *The Defense of Guinevere:* her excuse for having exchanged her hope for a moment's madness. Here's how she explains her ruinous infatuation for Lancelot: 'As if one should step slowly down some path worn smooth and even—down to a cool sea on a summer day.' "

"Don't let's make this a crying match," she cuts me short. "You add twenty years to your age when you become tragic. How far had we

reached in my defense—the end of the honeymoon, wasn't it?"

"You'd received a wire from Jeff's father," I refresh her memory, "informing you that your marriage was none of his business. You'd received a letter from your own father ordering you to return home and promising the hotel management that he would be responsible for your outstanding debts."

Mary laughs inappropriately.

"What babes in the wood we were! I wonder how many honeymoon couples have found themselves in our predicament. In three weeks we'd spent just short of a thousand dollars, which wasn't desperately reckless considering the huge sums that had been expended on our wedding. We'd simply lived on a scale to which we'd been accustomed. Our honeymoon certainly wasn't out of proportion."

"Then if you weren't at fault, who was?"

"Our parents," she smiled cheerfully. "You shake your head. You must refrain from snap judgments. I don't want to waste time in repetition, but I have to make things plain. My bridal gown, which could be worn on one solitary occasion, had cost more than our honeymoon. The

flowers to decorate the church must have cost twice the price of my bridal gown. I suppose the minister, harpist, and grand opera soloist couldn't have pocketed less than another five hundred, which was the sum Daddy gave me as a going-away present and ten times as much as Jeff's father gave his only son. What right had they to marry us off as royalty and then leave us in the lurch to starve as paupers?"

"Hold hard," I check her. "I could be a pauper very pleasantly for three weeks on a thousand dollars."

"So could we," she sniggers. "But when those three weeks were ended, we hadn't a bean with which to bless ourselves. Since we weren't reducing, we were anxious to learn whence our next meal was coming."

"I share your anxiety," I prompt her.

"Well, as you know,"—she sticks out her tongue—"Daddy besides promising to settle our hotel bills had enclosed our return fares. He'd forgotten, however, that it would be necessary to nourish us on the train, so Jeff pawned his watch."

"The least he could have done under the circumstances."

"Not at all," she contradicts; "he could have

pawned my jewelry. As you may imagine, we conducted some heart-searching conversations during the journey. We weren't one bit interested in the landscape. We were prodigals yanked back from the Far Country with the strong suspicion that there would be no fatted calf to greet us; it had been killed in advance to speed our departure. And oh, boy, how it had been slaughtered! We were stunned. I felt—— I wonder whether you'll get this. Our New Testament had opened with the wedding feast in Cana of Galilee; it was as though in the second chapter we had found the object of the previous rejoicing figuring as the woman taken in adultery. That's a bit strong for your palate. Well, console yourself, Unkie; it was strong for mine. If I hadn't committed adultery with Jeff, why was I being yanked back? Jeff and I argued the case like lawyers. In the midst of our arguing we would see the humor of our situation and laugh. Our parents had worn rings on their fingers and bells on their toes that they might honor our nuptials. By getting married I'd won my degree from the only university for which mine had fitted me. They'd known, if they'd had any sense, that a wedding is different from a funeral. Placing wreaths on a bride and bridegroom

doesn't nail them in their coffins. They remain very much above ground after the ceremony. If our parents for some quaint reason had intended to treat us as buried, the least they could have done was to marry us off cheaply and hand us the difference in cost."

"But this is what your panic caused you to imagine," I strive to curb her.

"I'm willing to acknowledge"—she cuddles her knee thoughtfully—"that Jeff and I weren't practical. All our lives we'd had people who had cramped our style by their jealousy in providing for us. And please don't look so condemning, Uncle Biff. One doesn't teach a child to swim by dropping it from a liner in mid-ocean. Jeff and I weren't exactly drowning; but, by golly, we were scared."

"I'm not condemning." I decide to steer a middle course. "I can see your point of view; but I can also see your parents'. Jeff's father had written truly, if harshly, when he'd wired, 'I didn't ask you to get married.' If it comes to that, nobody except one of the two people chiefly concerned ever does ask anyone else to get married. Marriages are too upsetting. They trample too many affections. They sever bonds. You and Jeff had taken the bit between your teeth. First

you'd challenged your parents' authority. Then you'd intimidated them into consenting. Having contracted obligations which you had no prospect of fulfilling, you expected these same parents whom you'd flouted——"

"At whom we'd thumbed our noses."

"The same thing stated modernly," I sail on. "You expected these poor dubs to assume your obligations. I'm not surprised they rebelled."

"Spoken like Queen Victoria," she congratulates me. "Are you telling me that I failed in duty when I married a man of my own choosing?"

"I'm telling you," I reply, a trifle nettled, "that you can't boast one minute that you can outjump anybody and the next clamor to be trundled in a baby carriage."

"Granted," she soothes me. "But who had taught me to be both weak and headstrong—vain as a peacock and pampered as a puppy? I was faked. I wasn't any of the fine things I purported to be. My good looks were a third cosmetics. My style was the taste of dressmakers. My self-confidence was the belief that I was prosperous. Strip me of my war paint and there wouldn't be any picture; the only thing genuine left would be the canvas. You're boiling over with protests; but it's the truth I'm telling you.

Any man who married a girl raised to my standards was bound to acquire a gold brick. Without money to groom me I couldn't be even decorative. Or put it this way: without money to propel me I was as useful as a juiceless automobile."

"Why this merciless self-denunciation?"

"Because I was beginning to perceive," she rushes on, "that Jeff had been swindled. He hadn't needed to be mercenary to suppose that I would bring him money. Everything Mummy had done from my coming-out to my wedding had been calculated to convey that impression. Heaps of people gaze into Fifth Avenue windows and admire lovely objects which they know they can't afford. If Jeff had been made quite sure at the start that he couldn't afford me, he'd have gazed in the window with all the other shoppers, admired and passed on. The same argument applies to myself, for he, too, had been given a deceiving setting of gorgeousness—horses, servants, social position, cars. If I'd been made quite sure I couldn't afford him——"

"Hang it all, Mary!" I lose my temper. "Where's your pride and your sense of proportion? This fellow who hadn't the ready cash to defray the expenses of his own honeymoon had

had the cheek to approach a man of your father's standing and to demand your hand in marriage. Within three weeks of your union he was dunning your father for contributions to your support. What attitude do you suppose any conscientious parent would adopt toward such a son-in-law? The French have a very ugly name for a man who lives on a woman."

"Spare me. I know it."

"A suitor who aspired to your hand ought to have possessed one of two things." I press my advantage: "either a large earning capacity or a private income."

"Certainly he ought," she agrees emphatically. "Jeff didn't possess either, because both our fathers had haggled over us. When it came to the settlement of a marriage portion, they'd each waited for the other to bid first. They'd waited so long that we'd set out on our matrimonial romp with all financial arrangements still in the air. Your opinion of Jeff is that he was a gentleman bum—though I doubt whether you'd add the 'gentleman.' By the same token, I was the lady bum. I'd never done a day's work. The philanthropists who had grown tired of maintaining me had auctioned me off. I'd been knocked down to Jeff with practically nothing

but the clothes I wore. If Jeff had bought me on the installment plan and defaulted after the first installment, my treatment of him hadn't been one iota more honest. We were the innocent instruments of our parents' sharp practice. Every hour of that train journey I puzzled how I could compensate him. At last I hit on a solution—a solution, mark you, which was quite in keeping with my character.

" 'Have I got *it*, Jeff?'

" 'Cinderella, you drive men crazy. If Helen's face could launch a thousand ships, your face could produce another world war.'

" 'Then leave everything to me. Stop worrying. I'm going to try my sex appeal on our daddies.' "

"I'm sure that worked the miracle," I sigh despondently.

Nothing is serious to Mary. She claps me between the shoulders.

"What a discerning old crab you are!"

"Then it did work?"

"Like the voice of one crying in the wilderness," she mocks me. "But we're skipping whole pages; we've not reached that part. Jeff and I were still at the stage where nothing would content us but holding hands all the time. If you

don't think we were red-headed lovers, you miss your bet. That's what makes it so pathetic to hear you humming and hawing as though our marriage had been optional. Jeff was drugged by my enchantment. Had I told him that my hair curled naturally, he'd have believed me. So when I merely swore that I could tame tyrants, he grew cheerful.

"We spent the morning in New York, screwing up our courage. It was afternoon when we halted before the parental door. Mummy was at a bridge club: Daddy was at the office. The butler informed us that my room had been prepared. It felt unreal to wander through my home with a husband tagging after me. Somehow I no longer belonged. The very walls seemed to disapprove of me.

"The landing, outside my bedroom, was piled with wooden boxes. They contained our presents. Mummy had had them packed during our absence. They gave a look of disorder. It hurt to see them all ready for removal. They kind of yelled that my reign was over—that everyone would be thankful when the last traces of me were gone.

"I spent the respite sorting away my pretties and picturing so many scenes from the past.

How when I was little I had sat at that window watching for a boy in a fur coat to rescue me. How, when I was a débutante, I had prinked and fussed before the mirror for parties. And then that last night of single blessedness, when I'd become hysterical and Mummy had warned me, whatever I did, not to have babies.

"Mummy's voice in the hall.

" 'My darling child!'

"She crushed me in her arms, but she never guessed how badly I needed her. The next moment she was inquiring in a tone that was vaguely hostile, 'And has Jeff accompanied you?'

"I knew then that it was to be a choice between her and Jeff. Iniquitous, wasn't it?"

"Go on." I withhold my verdict.

"Well, until Daddy put in an appearance, we chatted brightly about the weather, the press notices of my wedding—polite nothings. Only once did we verge on controversy, when Mummy made a dirty crack at the swells whom Jeff's people had included among their list of guests, many of whose invitations had been returned as not known at the embassies and country estates to which they had been addressed. Jeff and I were all for peace. I kicked his shin to remind him.

" 'Sorry,' was his only comment.

"Men are much more sincere than women; Daddy can't pretend. He talked to me as though I were a remote acquaintance and excluded Jeff altogether. Dinner was painful. Over coffee in the library he rose suddenly.

" 'I must speak with you alone, Mary.'

"In his den upstairs, as he lit a cigar he shot a question.

" 'Is he kind to you?'

"I realized at once that I could make him intensely happy by slipping off my frock and calling attention to imaginary bruises. He would have forgiven me everything—though God knows what there was to forgive—had I told him that Jeff was in the habit of beating me. Such a confession would have restored his confidence in me; it would have been an appeal for his protection. I would have given him the excuse to rush downstairs and kick Jeff into the gutter. What I didn't understand then, as I do now, was his utter loneliness. Mummy had gradually tiptoed out of his life; for years they'd only acted at being married. Perhaps I'd tiptoed out of his life, too; but, as he proceeded to explain, he didn't find fault with me for that. Mummy's fatal belief that she was always right had pre-

vented him from taking any hand in my upbringing.

"Of course, being a man, Uncle Biff, even though you're not a father, you've guessed what was at work in the back of his mind. He was the old bull of the herd. I was his heifer and I'd been stolen from him. That the theft had been legalized made no difference. He longed to be revenged.

"When I assured him that Jeff was tenderness itself, he couldn't disguise his disappointment. He branded Jeff's tenderness as sentiment. He would have preferred to see me the wife of a man who beat me, if at the same time he worked for me. The tailor's dummy who was my husband—— But at that point I stopped him. What was all the fuss? I wasn't an alley cat. I hadn't returned from a joy ride. He himself had accompanied me to the altar. If we'd spent too much on our honeymoon, I was the one who had been extravagant. I'd been trained to have all my wishes gratified. Jeff hadn't had the heart to refuse me.

" 'Then he had better find the heart,' Daddy flared. 'I don't intend to be his banker and, though I say it reluctantly, you're his responsibility.'

" 'But I'm what you've made me.'

"Perhaps I didn't use those words. Probably I told him that after having made such a mess of me, he was grossly unfair to pass on his failure to my husband.

" 'I didn't make a mess of you,' he retorted sadly. 'The mess was your mother's doing. She forbade me any authority. All I was permitted was to provide money and sit up late at night for you. I never approved of your fickle flirtations and the subordination of every family interest to the solitary ambition of getting you married. You tore about as though you were sex demented, urged on by your mother. My position in my own house has been utterly undignified. I've had less say in its conduct than my butler; he at least could give notice. I've been forced to eat my meals with unmannerly cubs whom I wouldn't employ on a bet; yet I was running the risk of adopting them as relations. They were given to understand that no courtesy was due me—that what they did with you at two in the morning was no concern of mine. When I complained to your mother she threatened that my old-fashioned interference would make you unpopular. She pictured the tragedy

I would cause if you lived and died a spinster.'

"He chewed on his cigar angrily.

" 'Weak! Of course I was weak. The tragedy has occurred. You're married to the only kind of a man you could have caught by such methods. Humph! Whom you married wasn't my concern! It was my business to efface myself and retire when I was high-hatted. Kids of your age knew it all. And now your marriage is so much my concern that within three weeks I receive S. O. S. telegrams. Pray, were any sent to old Stanhope?'

"It was the question I had dreaded. Daddy's real feud was not with Jeff. He would have been perfectly delighted with Jeff if his father had settled on him a lump sum—say enough to produce in interest the allowance he'd been giving him. So you see the trouble was money. It had nothing to do with character. Our extravagance on our honeymoon was only a pretext for this show-down.

"I had to own that Mr. Stanhope had not been omitted—in fact that Jeff had applied to him first.

" 'And his answer?' Daddy demanded.

" 'That he hadn't asked Jeff to get married.'

" 'The old miser!' Daddy bursts out. 'The wed-

ding cost him nothing but the half day he wasted in attending it. It cost me thousands. What a father! I can almost feel sorry for his son.' He seemed to, for he let up on his bitterness long enough again to inquire, 'You're sure Jeff doesn't abuse you?'

" 'Daddy dear, he adores me. The idea's absurd.'

" 'Then let him prove it by supporting you. It's a bit thick after having been cleaned out by your pretentious wedding to have you back on my hands, dressed up like a million dollars and actually penniless.'

" 'Cleaned out, Daddy! But you're rich.'

"He changed his tone from accusation to a plea for sympathy.

"It's been a terrible strain keeping up appearances, Mary. Making you socially eligible has left me exhausted. The last straw was your wedding. I simply can't face up to financing a son-in-law—especially a son-in-law who was thrust upon me. In justice to myself I must retrench.'

"To me it seemed that he was belly-aching with a purpose—to prevent me from striking him for an allowance.

" 'If you were still single,' he pushed back his chair, signifying that the interview was ended,

'I would stake you; but I don't propose to spare old Stanhope's pockets by sacrificing for a lazy young dog whom he's raised to do nothing.'

"The first words that greeted my ears as we came downstairs were Mummy's.

" 'Having made your bed, you must lie on it.' She was addressing Jeff in a hard, cold voice.

"At sight of me and Daddy she turned.

" 'I don't know what your father has been saying to you, Mary. I don't care what arrangements you've concocted. You always had the trick of twisting him round your finger. This is the time when you don't. You're off our hands. You've two feet of your own. Learn to stand on them.'

"That was only the preface to her indictment. To hear the way she carried on, you might have supposed that she'd been my victim instead of the opposite. Among other things she complained that I'd never respected her. It was true; I never had. But how could I tell her that my every memory of her made me pity her?"

"I must say, Mary, you have your nerve. You're intolerably cold-blooded."

"When one's honest, Uncle Biff, one's usually cold-blooded." Then with a proud jerk of her

head, "But why should I be meek? I'd married the man I loved. Mummy hadn't. You were the man she loved. She'd sold herself to Daddy for what he was worth—which was unaccompanied trips to European baths to keep her figure young and slender. However prejudiced you may be in judging between us, I was the cleaner woman."

"What was the upshot of this unpleasantness?" I strive for information. "You hadn't arranged where you were going to settle when you set out on your honeymoon, so—as I understand the situation—unless your parents allowed you to stay with them, you had no roof to cover you."

"You win your guess." Mary shrugs her lovely shoulders. "I hope it's dawned on you why I asked you some time ago whether all people of your generation were asses. The money spent on flowers for our wedding would have paid our first year's rent. So this marriage, which I had thought was going to bring so much happiness to everybody——"

"Don't go aëroplaning," I halt her. "Whoever thought, you didn't. You never do. You act first and think after."

"Have it your own way," she retracts impenitently. "But you asked what was the upshot of

this unpleasantness. Daddy and Mummy could never agree on anything. If a discussion arose they were invariably in opposite camps. They both had grievances. While Jeff was present I didn't want to involve them in a quarrel. I saw clearly that Jeff and I were doomed to form the wedge for widening the rift between them."

"What did you do?" I insist.

"Darling,"—she curves a cozening arm about me—"I resorted to strategy. There was a bed upstairs and a door that locked. I signed to Jeff to beat an ignominious retreat.

"Inside the dear little room which had once been mine I flopped to the floor and giggled hysterically.

" 'Aren't they frauds? You and I are the only real persons.'

"Jeff wasn't sure whether I was being humorous. Kneeling beside me, he took my hands.

" 'Your sex appeal didn't work the oracle, Cinderella. Looks as though all our loved ones had short-changed us. But I never meant to short-change you. Cinderella, you do believe that?'

" 'I know you didn't.' I clung to him passionately. 'You haven't short-changed me. You wouldn't. You're the only friend I have.'

" 'But why do they hate us?' he whispered later as we cuddled beneath the sheets in the silent house.

" 'We're married.'

" 'But they wanted us to marry,' he protested. 'They didn't want us to marry each other, that's evident. But they wanted us to marry someone. My mother was everlastingly chucking girls at my head.'

" 'It's an old Spanish custom,' I sniggered.

" 'What is?' he questioned.

" 'To persuade people to marry and then treat them as lepers. Don't you see why? When we lived at home we were their possessions.' "

Mary winks a naughty eye.

"Of course you, who are so wise, have already discerned that jealousy lay at the root of the mischief. Their property rights had been invaded. Jeff and I had preferred each other. Parents who would have gone without shoes for you when you were theirs, refuse you a crust when you're someone else's."

"Without wishing to be censorious, Mary," —I make my tone conciliatory—"it would seem to me that you were the one in your family who refused to share. Perhaps it would be more fair to say who had never been expected to share. You'd

accepted everything except advice. You'd hogged the limelight. You'd considered it perfectly normal that your mother, famed for her beauty, should resign in your favor. To an outsider it appeared that you were a young queen and your parents were your lackeys. You took the pick of everything. You exploited their unselfishness. You even pocketed their privacy. On the night you made your bow to society they lost their home; you turned it into a boarding house."

"Oh, dry up." Instantly she apologizes. "You drive me to rudeness, Unkie. You mean awfully well, but the arrows of my eloquence never seem to penetrate your skull. I didn't ask my parents to indulge me; their indulgence only worked me cruelty. Can you deny that when I married, they bandaged my eyes and shoved me over a precipice?"

"Which precipice?" I annoy her.

"I mean that knowing everything themselves, they protected me with none of their knowledge."

"But you knew as much as most girls."

"Probably."

"Then what ought you to have known?"

"The truth, instead of a lot of poppycock."

Springing to her feet, she begins to pace. "Marriage isn't a golden dawn—at least it's only that to people who haven't tried it. No one warned me of the risks I was taking. No one said to me, 'Marriage is a succession of physical shocks, finishing up with having a baby.' Pray, Uncle Biff, what could be more physically shocking than the way in which babies are brought into the world? Birds and fishes get off more lightly. It's as though God had said, 'I've made human beings in My own image, but they shall be born in a manner that'll keep them humble.' "

"But you were supposed to be sophisticated and you haven't had a baby," I gasp. "Sophistication is the boast of your generation. If sophistication means anything it means that nothing can shock you. No noodle of my age would so insult a spry Alec of yours as to presume that you required enlightenment. Look how you've enlightened me since we started this collaboration. For parents of over forty—in their second childhood, as one might say—to attempt to hand information to their adolescent offspring would be carting coals to Newcastle—teaching their youngers and therefore their betters to suck eggs. Your claim is that you were hatched into

the world omniscient, whereas everyone who preceded you the longer he lives becomes more rheumatic in his intellect."

She stops pacing. "You're not fool enough to believe that every rabbit-faced flapper the moment she rolls her stockings plumbs the heights and depths of human experience."

"That's what the rabbit-faced flappers tell me."

Seizing a cushion, she hurls it at me.

"Brute. So you think it's sport to ridicule them! The poor little half-wits are only advertising their curiosity. They're announcing that they're willing to be initiated. But quit spoofing. There's more to this swindle. For girls raised as I was, marriage, far from being the golden dawn of a new emancipation, spells broken nails, back streets, hauling furniture, scrubbing floors, darning socks, skating on one wheel round financial corners. It means performing chores at which the lady's maid, who groomed me for my débutante parties, would turn up her nose—they would cause her to lose caste with her fellow domestics."

I play into her hands.

"Haven't you answered your own question as to why your eyes were bandaged? What girl

would consent to be shoved over the precipice if she knew that she was leaping into a bed of stinging nettles?"

"You're the cutest old uncle!" She flings herself on the couch beside me. "Of course that was why I was allowed to think I knew everything. And yet it's funny: while there's precious little that recommends marriage, there's nothing that takes its place."

"That's why you'll marry again," I twit her. "But you're the object lesson of these doleful reminiscences. Before we digressed, you'd returned from your honeymoon beanless. What followed?"

"Next day my people didn't relent. In their bedroom during the dawn hours they must have arrived at some sort of a compact; at breakfast they were firm not to be played for suckers. They had thought up the most stunning arguments. I'll give you a few samples.

"They'd postponed their careers for my sake; at last they had a chance to live for themselves. I'd run wild long enough; it was high time I came to my senses. They'd overspent themselves that I might obtain what I'd desired. I'd desired a husband. Well, there sat Jeff. They'd got to pull in their horns. They'd heard an awful lot

about what was due to youth; it was fair to remember that even more was due to middle age. Daddy protested that if he died there'd be little left except his insurance. Jeff caught my eye, as much as to say, 'So much for the accuracy of dossiers!' He'd already told me that his father had gathered excellent reports of my family's financial standing.

"Mummy took up the running.

" 'It's this way, Mary: while you lived at home, neither I nor your father could move without stumbling over you. Speaking for myself, I consider I've been a martyr. You usurped my privileges by constituting yourself your father's auxiliary wife. If I disagreed with him, there was always you to take his side. The longer you're married the more you'll understand what I'm driving at.'

"She didn't need to split my head open. I recognized an ax when I saw it. But I wasn't permitted a chance to say so, for she was continuing poetically: 'When fledglings have left the home nest, they can't come flying back. What's true of sparrows is true of human beings. It's a law of nature.'

"That, too, didn't require hammering. But I wasn't such a dumb-bell that I wasn't aware

that Mummy was wilfully muddling the issues. It wasn't a law of nature that the old birds should clip the fledglings' wings before they chucked them into the void. Not only had Jeff and I not been taught to fly; our wings had been mutilated. We were an easy prey for prowling pussies."

Mary produces a mirror and powders her nose. Satisfied with her final inspection, she resumes the thread of her narrative.

"Mind you, I'm not rabid on the subject of parents. I'm willing to admit that I must have been a pesky nuisance. Someone has written that children are doubtful joys and certain sorrows. That's frightfully accurate of daughters. I don't wonder the Chinese drown them. Here's the way I figure my parents' attitude. While I'd lived at home I'd become a habit; they'd become so used to the pain of me that they'd scarcely noticed it. My three weeks' absence on my honeymoon had given them a respite to realize how they'd suffered. 'Never again' was their motto. From being spendthrifts, they'd swung to the opposite extreme; they'd gone sour—developed into tightwads.

"As far as Daddy was concerned, he bordered on mutiny. That very morning the mail had

brought him a pile of wedding bills clamoring for payment. He was as willing to quarrel with Mummy as he was with Jeff and me. He accused her violently of having contracted the chief part of these debts without his consent. In future she would take orders from him or he'd learn the reason. When he had departed for business, I received the backwash of their private row. It was some backwash. Mummy led me aside and did her darnedest to gouge from me information to Jeff's discredit. Had I played her game, we could have become fast friends. Since I had nothing but good to report about him, the old jibes were revived—his father's craftiness, his mother's Queen Mary hats.

"As an escape after lunch Jeff and I visited his parents. Our reception was the duplicate of my own homecoming, only more suave, if you understand me. Daddy Stanhope, the downy bird, derived the usual kick from cuddling me. Gee, it's cheap to be a father-in-law and squeeze a pretty girl for nothing. His starchy dame clutched Jeff to her bosom as though he were the sole survivor of a shipwreck. She examined him for scratches as though she expected to find an eye missing. All went well till a reference was

made to money. Daddy Stanhope became courtly.

" 'We'll discuss that as between men.'

"He disappeared, Jeff following. I recognized the familiar police strategy: hustle the criminals into separate cells in the hope that behind closed doors they'll convict each other.

"The moment we were alone, Madame Stanhope paved the way for confidences. How on earth could we be short of money? I lit a cigarette to steady my nerves and murmured between puffs that fifty bucks didn't go far on a honeymoon.

" 'But you had more than that, my dear.'

" 'If we had, Mrs. Stanhope, it doesn't concern you. Fifty dollars was the extent of your own and your husband's liberality.'

" 'Your telegram was very alarming,' she persisted. 'It indicated to us that our son's wife was extravagant.'

"Can you beat that, Uncle Biff? I asked her how much it cost her to run her home for three weeks and added the information that, despite rumors she might have heard to the contrary, hotels charged more for double-bedded rooms than for single ones.

"She ignored my sarcasm, though her corsets creaked with indignation. A man in love was in

a woman's power to make or mar him. She implored me not to lead her son into loose habits.

"That got my nanny. I let her have my bucket of dirt and kissed my hand to reticences. I challenged her to poison Jeff's mind against me. If there was any poisoning to be done, I'd get there first. I gave her an unexpurgated description of what my parents thought of her and her husband.

" 'You played my daddy for a good thing. You bragged about your social connections and created the impression that Jeff was the season's catch. You smirked to the last moment, dropping mysterious hints of the fine things you planned for him. And what did you plan? You left him on our doorstep as though he were a foundling. You satisfied your vanity with a pompous wedding. You frisked my daddy like a pair of hold-up artists.'

"I was mad clean through. There wasn't an injury I spared her. Oddly enough, in attacking her, I began to sympathize with Daddy's and Mummy's obstinacy. But their obstinacy was nothing as compared to hers. She stared at me as though she were a sacred elephant, white and mountainous. I became frantic to excite her."

"And did you succeed?"

"You bet I did. I'd tried everything, when suddenly I remembered her lists of wedding guests and the stacks of invitations which kept returning marked 'unknown at this address.' She was an old snob; so when I taunted her with having tried to impress us by claiming acquaintance with well-placed people who were complete strangers to her, she sprang into action.

"From then on it was a competition as to which of us could be most venomous. I was a vulgar little thing; it was a sad day for her when her son had met me. She criticized the reckless *chic* with which I dressed—there wasn't much she didn't criticize. I called attention to the antediluvian vintage of her hats—a remark which won me an enemy for life. We were hard at it, handing flinty advice, when the male portion of the Stanhope clan rejoined us.

"The downy bird was twinkling with benevolence; he might have come from concealing gold in Christmas stockings. He went straight to the point. Jeff had been talking to him about ways and means. His kindly nature prompted him to sign a check. That would be relieving his own feelings at the price of our independence. But—

" 'I've told Jeff, Mother,'—he turned to his wife—'as I'm now telling Mary, that when two

people consider themselves old enough to marry, they must be considered old enough to handle their own destinies.'

" 'Bologny!' I flung at him. 'Come on, Jeff. We wouldn't touch a cent of their stinking lucre.'

"Even that didn't ruffle him. From the steps he addressed our backs, 'Mother and I will be always glad to entertain you for your Sunday dinner.'

" 'She won't,' I whispered to Jeff. 'Neither will he when he's heard all the timely home truths I've handed her.' "

"And pray what was the verdict of God's gift to women?" I ask.

"If you're referring to my husband, please call him Jeff."

"I was referring to no one else."

"He was ashamed and furious. What made him most sore was his father's smug prophecy that one day he would thank him for his refusal. What he'd actually said was something of this sort:

" 'I'm putting you on your mettle, my boy. It hurts like the devil. Everything's up to you. You'll have to strip off your coat and work.' Swelling out his chest, 'Like I did,' he'd added.

"It wasn't until we'd left the trolley and were almost at my parents' door that Jeff broke his worst news. His father, cruel as it might sound, had felt compelled to make a final excruciating sacrifice. To spur his offspring's energies, he had cut off his allowance.

"The full calamity didn't dawn on me. My first thought was for Jeff's pride.

" 'Whatever happens,' I seized his arm, 'that's something we must never tell my people. I'll sell my jewelry—part with anything.' "

"Mary, I've a question," I interrupt. "It'll save you a lot of painful reminiscing. I'm not asking from idle curiosity. At what point did you cease to love him?"

How she might have answered I cannot guess. The push button which people press beneath the card bearing the name of an occupant, when they're anxious to gain admittance to the apartment house, started ringing. The occupant thus summoned inquires the visitor's business through a speaking-tube and, if willing to be disturbed, presses another button which releases the front-door latch.

"Botheration! Excuse me."

Mary vanishes into the hall.

"Oh, it's you!"

Her voice dwindles and becomes secretive. Evidently she hopes I'm not listening.

"Uncle Biff's up here. I'm sure you won't want to . . . I agree with you. Not wise under the circumstances. . . . Very well, then. . . . Arranged. Toddle along."

She reënters, airy and innocent. I rise filled with apostolic fervor.

"I ought to tell you, Mary Angel, that I overheard you."

"What of it?"

"Only this: if it's a man——"

She laughs, at first chucklingly, then uproariously.

"Oh, you! To be suspicious!"

"But, my dear girl!" I wonder whether I ought to warn her of the detectives who are watching her. "What I mean to say is that a child, married less than a year and estranged from her husband, should practise the utmost discretion."

"I do." She becomes wary as a mouse. "I suppose to set your mind at rest I'll have to reveal the personality of my caller."

"You don't have to."

"Prepare yourself for a shock."

"Who is he?"

"She's the woman whom my daddy loves."

A lengthy pause.

"You're learning for the first time that he loves another woman?" she questions.

"I don't believe it," I burst out.

"Neither did I at first." She insinuates a cool hand into mine. "Now that I love her, too, she seems quite natural—almost proper. But she enters my story later. Where were we?"

"I can't let things go at that," I exclaim. "I gave up your mother; and now you tell me that your father never deserved her."

"Pardon me. I didn't. I implied that my mother never deserved my daddy. I remember where we were: Jeff had just told me that the paternal concern for his best interests had cut off his allowance. I hope you realize what that spelt for us: we were three weeks married and we hadn't a dollar bill in sight. The only strategy that our necessity suggested to us was to be as nice as we knew how to Mummy and Daddy in the hope that we might sweeten their embittered natures. To state matters crudely, by settling down on them we believed we could wear them out.

"We had another think coming. We occupied a room in their house and ate our meals with them, but they went about their business as if

we were not there. At the end of a week Mummy cornered me.

" 'Made any plans? The landing on the second floor looks like an auction room with all those boxes.'

"Funny that she should have compared the landing to an auction room! It was the way it struck me who had been auctioned. The boxes contained a queer assortment of expensive rubbish. We hadn't been given brooms and kitchenware—the kind of presents that would have been useful to people in our stranded position—but gifts that had flattered the donors in the bestowal. Before we were married detectives had been hired to guard them. They were just as valuable —we weren't; so there were no detectives. A parable!

" 'We'll be very grateful, Daddy and I,' Mummy ended politely, 'if you'll remove them.'

"When I told Jeff this, we had our first quarrel.

" 'So your people are as shabby as mine!'

" 'They couldn't be.'

"Recriminations flew back and forth. How I had insulted his mother—from which I guessed he visited her behind my back.

" 'Why shouldn't I?' he flamed. 'My parents

mean no more to you than yours do to me; yet you compel me to live with yours.'

" 'Tough luck!' I sneered. 'Your parents would sooner shelter a stray cat.'

"Then with a shock we realized that we had been almost hating each other. We pledged ourselves that this should never happen again, however hard his parents or mine goaded us.

"Prudence demanded that we should vamose to neutral territory, even though the neutral territory took the form of a workman's tenement. From the day of our homecoming Jeff had been hunting a job. The limit of his earning capacity seemed to be thirty dollars. He called on many of the glad-hand artists who had been guests at our wedding, hoping that they might harbor a kindness for him. They did, they assured him; but they divided their social from their business interests in water-tight compartments. He'd been at his best, they hinted, as an extra pair of pants on a stag-line. For such services they had been willing to reward him with free champagne, a jazz band, and their daughters' company. By marrying he had damaged himself. What it came to was this: as a college man who hadn't specialized, he was a lily

of the field, pleasant to look at but useless. So you see, Uncle Biff, we were a pair of decorations.

"At last his former employers on Wall Street offered him his job back at the old figure, plus a small percentage. The percentage was based on new accounts he might bring to them. They had read reports of his wedding and believed that he still moved in wealthy circles.

"Jeff confided, 'Of course they'll sack me when they find out; heaven knows how we're going to exist on thirty bucks a week. We've both spent more than that in an evening on a dinner and theater tickets.'

"I was the one who saw daylight. I had heard, though I wasn't sure whether it was true, that fashionable stores made a practice of re-buying, at a discount, wedding presents which had been purchased from them. Were that the case, we could contrive to muddle along for half a year in this fantastic fashion.

"Immediately, in our own imaginations we had become a young couple of established means and set to work inspecting apartments. A cart-before-the-horse procedure! As a rule where one's going to live is settled before the nuptials.

"I won't bother you with details of our search

or our stupefaction at the prices asked for rentals. The moment we saw this apartment, without a thought as to whether we could afford it, we fell for it.

"When Mummy heard that we had signed a lease, she became mildly curious. I allowed her to arrive at her own conclusions, which were that Mr. Stanhope was assisting. Her relief that she was getting rid of us and our boxes told me eloquently that her fear had been that our visit might have prolonged itself into a habit."

"One minute," I arrest her. "How did you satisfy the landlord? He must have demanded an advance—some sort of a security?"

"I pawned a ring, since you have to be exact, and gave my daddy's name as reference. In the joy of our regained privacy, it really seemed that we had magically solved life's problems. We had nothing to do now when we were hard up but to re-sell some of our presents to the stores at which they had been purchased."

She pauses, regarding me quizzically.

"I have the odd feeling, Unkie, that I'm boring you."

"I'm waiting, Mary, with an impatience which your self-centeredness is continually thwarting,

to learn more about your father's—I scarcely know what to call her."

"Rome wasn't built in a day, darling," she caresses me, "and it took just as long to topple it. I don't care if you aren't interested; you're first going to hear the pathetic sob-story of my tragedy. It shall be narrated as briefly as is consistent with dramatic values.

"Jeff and I had expected, in spite of omens to the contrary, that heaven on earth would commence. Needless to say, it didn't. What began was unmitigated flatness.

"Withhold your judgment, old dear. I perceive you're on the point of bursting. Take my case. I'd lived the abnormal round of a man-hunter, rising and going to bed at unseemly hours. I'd been wined and fêted and flattered. The only excuse for my existence had been to rouse young men to passion. I had all day with nothing to do on my hands. You're about to tell me that I ought to have found plenty to occupy me in the execution of my wifely duties. I ought; but I didn't. Nothing in my experience had trained me for wifehood. All I had been taught was how to make the most of my appearance. The delicatessen store supplied our meals. I brought them home ready-cooked in paper bags.

Shiftless! I'll say it was. But where's the good of accusing myself?

"The thought that rankled was that I'd ceased to be of importance. After having been invited everywhere, I was left out. When you marry, the world regards you as done and finished—leaves you to stew in your own juice, as it were. Of course the reason for this was that when we were entertained, we were expected to entertain back. We couldn't on our income. We hadn't realized that till now all our return entertaining had been done for us in the well-staffed, spacious establishments of our parents. As summer advanced and unmarried girls sailed for Europe or motored away to the seashore, I began to be filled with a sense of injustice. It seemed to me that I was being punished.

"Another knowledge crept into evidence, that neither Jeff nor I was as interesting to each other as we'd fancied. It takes a clever woman to be as intriguing to her husband as she was to the lover who stole kisses from her in a taxi.

"Lastly, there were our parents, with whom we each kept in secret touch.

"I could go on handing you reasons all evening for the chasm that was widening. And, mind you, we weren't peculiar. The back streets of

every city are jammed with ex-débutantes who fell from grace by doing precisely what I'd done —marrying. I'd joined the legion of the lost ones, the cohort of the damned, to quote the violent Mr. Kipling. Perhaps you remember Rossetti's 'Ballad of Dead Ladies,' each verse ending with the refrain, 'But where are the snows of yesteryear?' My dear Uncle, where are they—the girls who queened it in ballrooms, gave themselves to the one man who could make them happy, and instantly faded?

"I'm going to sum up by giving you four reasons for my losing Jeff. First, I'd picked up Mummy's attitude to Daddy—I regarded a husband as a self-appointed beast of burden. Second, while I thought that he owed it to me to be equipped to win success, I was perfectly contented to be inefficient. Third, though I was a wife, I couldn't rid myself of the habit of testing my powers of flirtation—in other words, while I loved Jeff to distraction, my instinct was to attract all and sundry, giving the impression that I was promiscuous. Fourth, I was a luxury, married to a luxury. I was an utterly futile luxury at that—I couldn't sing, play the piano, read intelligently. My only attainment was to look beautiful—which must have grown a little tedi-

ous to a man who was going without his lunch that he might save a few more cents out of the thirty per week he earned."

"It's growing late, Mary," I remind her plaintively. "If you don't hurry, you'll never reach the part I'm anxious to learn about."

Mary rises huffily. I realize instantly that I've offended.

"You're indelicate, Uncle Biff, to say the least. I've been baring my soul to you. I've been revealing to you how my heart was crushed. I'm approaching the moment when I made my supreme sacrifice. All this means nothing to you, now that you've become more interested in my daddy's poor little affair."

I attempt to apologize.

"Not at all." She shakes her bobbed locks. "You've destroyed my inspiration. You asked for the rest in shorthand; that's how you're going to get it. The bust up came through our parents. Mummy ignored Jeff, except to *criticize, criticize, criticize.* Her criticisms were always spoken to me—never to his face. The Stanhopes returned the compliment, only in their case I was the object of attack and Jeff was the victim with whom they sympathized. In July my people closed their house and set off for a two months'

tour of Canada. The Stanhopes stayed at home. I had nowhere to go now as a relief from monotony. Jeff's evasive answers after his visits to his parents, and my own guilty knowledge of the sort of questions mine had asked me, made me aware that I was being discussed continually to my disadvantage. Moreover, Jeff brought back with him an atmosphere of suspicion—almost of disloyalty. Things were going from bad to worse with us financially, when the worst happened. It was the slack season on Wall Street—midsummer, hot as pepper. One evening Jeff didn't return to dinner. I didn't hear his key in the latch till close on to midnight. He'd received the sack. Instead of coming home with the news to me direct, he'd flown off to consult his father. Bit by bit I gouged the result of the consultation from him. His father was willing to see him through on one condition—that we broke up housekeeping and, until he was on his feet, I sat myself down on my parents.

" 'Of course that's unthinkable,' Jeff said.

"It wasn't unthinkable to me. I argued the offer with myself for and against, for and against, all through the sweltering, never-ending night. I had meant to do so nobly by Jeff. Through my own fault or other people's—whose was of no

consequence—I had only hampered him. If I insisted on digging my claws into him, I was stealing his last chance of redeeming himself.

"Next morning he set out again to see his father. I'd made up my mind. I wrote him the kind of letter that was calculated to make him hate me. There wasn't a word of truth in it. I told him that I'd married him for money; that I had another beau in sight. I wrote him, furthermore, that I would be absent from the apartment for two days and hoped to find him gone when I returned. But I indulged myself in a last revenge against my real enemy. Calling his mother on the phone, I told her, 'You sly old devil, you've worked the trick. Congratulations. You can have him.'

"Shoving my nightie and a large supply of handkerchiefs in a handbag, I pawned another piece of jewelry and took the train to Atlantic City."

"Why only a nightie and handkerchiefs?" I seek enlightenment.

"Stupid, why does one wear a nightie? The handkerchiefs were because I expected to do a lot of crying."

"So that's how it happened? He believed your letter? He'd vanished when you returned?"

"So that's how it happened, told in shorthand," she mimicks me. "Now stir your stumps, Unkie. The hour's late and you've been very annoying."

"But——" I protest.

She guesses what's coming and has no patience to hear it.

"You'll make me mad if you delay," she threatens. Then relenting. "You shall hear about her next time."

THE RE-BLESSING OF MARY ANGEL

"So I had met my Waterloo," Mary Angel resumes on my next visit, having sprawled herself on the couch and tugged at her frill of a skirt in an attempt to make it cover more than is reasonable of her shapely legs.

"Surely it's too early to decide"—I smile—"whether you were Wellington or Napoleon?"

"I went into exile." She grins with her incurable faculty for treating tragedy as a jest. "Atlantic City was my St. Helena; there I cried out my eyes to the moan of the sad sea waves. All my disasters had piled up in the proper sequence, just as a long-headed old guy of your generation must have foreseen they would for a know-it-all, high-hatting flapper of mine. I'm waiting to

hear you tell me that I got all I richly deserved."

"You didn't." I am deeply hurt that she should attribute to me such harshness. "You were the victim of malicious carelessness."

"You don't really think so." She stares at me incredulously.

"My poor child,"—I become emotional—"your every statement acquits you. You're the product of a society-crazy mother and a money-grabbing father. There's nothing gained by being too hard on them, for they, too, are products of a system. They conceived that their duty was not to cultivate your sense of beauty, not to develop your latent talents, not to prepare you to withstand life's knocks, but to marry you to the most eligible male procurable."

"Now we're off." Mary digs me with her elbow. "But don't jam on the brakes. Something tells me that I'm going to enjoy your sermon."

"Their standards for judging whether a male was eligible," I rant, "were based solely on material possessions. Congeniality didn't enter into their calculations. A male, to be eligible, didn't need to possess money himself; the prime essential was that money must be in his family. Can't you see how stupid their point of view was? A dog-breeder sets more store by spiritual values."

She rummages in a box of chocolates. "Haven't I insisted that I was auctioned?"

"Worse than auctioned," I press my argument. "You've been made the innocent accomplice of a fraud. Your parents deliberately overspent themselves to create a faked appearance of wealth, on the supposition that a bank account is more attractive to a lover than goodness. Their flourish of wealth was the carrot which lures the donkey to capture; directly they'd slipped the halter over the donkey's head, they placed the carrot back in their pocket. There was good reason for their parsimony—by the time they'd got you married they'd spent themselves to a standstill.

"If the deception had worked the way they'd planned, they would have pulled off a very neat job. Your husband's parents, had they been honorable, would have felt compelled to maintain you. Unfortunately they were shysters of the same order, who, having rid themselves of their son, couldn't afford to keep up the bluff any longer. So both families quit cold the moment they'd seen you spliced, bequeathing you as marriage portion a champagne appetite to support on tap water."

"King, you've said a mouthful," she applauds.

"You pawned your wedding presents to survive." I sweep forward on the crest of my eloquence. "That couldn't continue forever. A day was bound to dawn when the pair of you, having exhausted your resources, would land back on either the Stanhopes or the Angels. To cut their losses your families, now thoroughly embittered, started a tug-of-war, the Stanhopes hanging on to Jeff's coat-tails, the Angels on to your skirts. That one mouth is cheaper to feed than two must have been their argument. Nothing decisive occurred till your husband was sacked by his employers. That gave your in-laws the advantage. Your parents were away on holiday. You had no one to advise you. You were completely at the Stanhopes' mercy. They decreed that they were prepared to stake their son but not their daughter-in-law. Such discrimination meant divorce. You, like the magnanimous little mug you are, thought first for your husband. In your opinion you were dragging him down. You preferred to do all the sinking that he might be rescued. You destroyed his affection by the ruse of a lying letter." I draw myself up lest I may have overshot the mark. "I suppose you did destroy his affection?"

"Root and branch." She bursts into hilarity.

"But you're too absurd. Till now you've insisted that your generation is noble beyond suspicion, and here you are blackguarding it as a whited sepulcher."

I switch her back to her main narrative.

"Let's get forward with our dying. At the point where we left off you'd written your poisonous letter to your husband and skipped to Atlantic City. What followed?"

She pats her spit-curls with her accustomed levity.

"Nothing of any consequence. I stopped there for two days, and having dabbed my tears on my last handkerchief, returned to the apartment to seek a fresh supply. All my friends were away in Europe or at the seashore. Jeff had believed my letter and made himself scarce. The avenue was shuttered as Main Street on a Sunday. There was no one to whom I could turn; for the first time I had to rely on myself. I determined to discover my worth."

"How do you mean?"

"How would I mean, you dumb bunny? Excuse me, but you do ask the most senseless questions. I joined the ranks of the wage earners. You probably can't conceive that anyone would be idiot enough to hire me. Neither could I.

Nevertheless, I made an audit of my capabilities. They weren't in the plural. I possessed one asset: I'd been taught to be decorative. I decided to cash in on that. To cut a long story short, I visited all the fashionable dressmakers whom Mummy and I had patronized. At last I was engaged as a model by—— But you'll never guess. It's the ripest joke if you're in a mood for jesting."

"I'm not."

"I was engaged by the French house where my bridal gown was purchased. They'd gained a lot of kudos from the press notices which Mummy had inspired. Had they known that I needed money, I'm certain they would have given me the go-by; I persuaded them that I was seeking a new sensation.

"I was a good advertisement. I made the store interesting. The saleswomen would whisper my pedigree to customers. I was a lady, so I didn't have to be ordered to park my gum before I paraded. The weather being hot, I rather enjoyed sitting about in my undies.

"One morning while I was showing off a wedding gown, I was conscious that I was being studied. Not by a man. Sorry to disappoint your romantic tendencies. The watcher was a sensibly

tailored woman, about thirty, devoid of make-up. She impressed me as being vaguely familiar. Evidently that was how I impressed her, for I could guess from her discreet glances that she was discussing me. When I came out from the dressing room to display another frock, she was gone. I gave the incident so little thought that long before evening I had completely forgotten her.

"As I was entering my apartment house, carrying my supper in paper bags which I had collected at the neighborhood's delicatessen store, on whom should I clap eyes but the same woman. By pressing the button which rings in my apartment she was attempting to gain admittance. I tapped her on the shoulder, inquiring whether I was the person on whom she was calling. She acknowledged that I was.

" 'That's fine,' I told her. 'Holding conversations with oneself the way I've been doing lately isn't all that it's cracked up to be.'

" 'Do you do that, too?' she questioned quickly.

" 'You bet,' I nodded. 'Listening to my own blather is driving me insane.'

"In the elevator, I probed her.

" 'You were in the shop where I work this morning; but I've seen you before.'

" 'I expect you have,' she replied.

"I let it go at that; later she would have to tell me.

"You've been so long a bachelor, Uncle Biff, that probably you've become used to being lonely. I hadn't. Every evening when I returned to the apartment I hoped to see Jeff. I would try to fool myself as I stepped across the threshold: 'It's only Mary.' When I'd closed the door, I would stand listening, my heart pounding. My imagination played me tricks. I'd feel certain he'd returned and was hiding. In the old days he used to do that for the fun of pouncing out on me. So I would search the cupboards. Every night before I dived between the sheets I would look beneath the bed. Then, just as I was falling off to sleep, I'd shoot upright, persuaded that I'd heard the creak of his footsteps. I liked to believe that my sensation of his presence was his thoughts.

"But you'll be losing patience. I'm only telling you this to explain why I was so grateful to have anyone, even a stranger, save me from my monotony. She was tremendously practical—a thousand times more so than myself. She cooked

a scrumptious meal from the delicatessen oddments I'd purchased. Our shyness had nearly melted by the time we'd finished dish-washing."

"And then?" I prompt.

"Whoever she was, I'd discovered that she was one in a thousand. Pretty, too. With her hat off she didn't look so competent—just trustworthy. She had curly, bobbed hair, darker than mine, nearly chestnut. But you're not interested in the color of her hair. She had one weakness: she smoked. Draping ourselves at opposite ends of the couch, we puffed like chimnies."

"Mary, you can be very tantalizing," I interrupt. "For the love of Mike, who was she?"

"That's what I asked her, Unkie. She said she was Alice—which conveyed precisely nothing.

" 'Well, Alice,' I joked her, 'if you're here to sell me mining stock, I'm busted. But if you've fallen for me as flatly as I have for you, call often.'

"Her answer surprised me, 'If you're poor, I'll lend you money.'

" 'I'm poor as Job's turkey. But how did you guess?'

"That set her going.

" 'After the magnificence of your wedding,'—

she fixed me with her quiet eyes—'it's given me quite a shock to find you working as a model. Something's gone wrong. I can't guess what. It's something to do with your husband. If you'll tell me, I'm certain I can help.'

"I hadn't had anyone show that much interest in me for ages. The general attitude had been that I'd ceased to be anybody's business the moment I was married. It was my own disaster whether I sank or swam. Relations weren't anxious to be informed how I was progressing, for fear they might be summoned to my rescue. As you know, Mummy and Daddy had buzzed off on a two months' automobile tour. If I'd wanted to communicate with them, I hadn't their address—only picture postcards of the beautiful palaces at which they had last stopped. So when a good Samaritan came ringing my door bell with an offer of sympathy, I accepted her motives at face value.

" 'You poor kid!' she encouraged. By the time I'd ended, she was holding me in her arms.

" 'It's a crime.' She pronounced her verdict.

"By rights I was the one who ought to have staged the moist performance; but I'm hard-boiled. She, being ten years my senior, evidently felt that the situation required watering. Com-

mencing with a few drops, she sobbed so violently that I was afraid she was going into hysterics. I had to dab her face with a damp towel and make her sniff smelling-salts. Mind you, her intention had been to comfort me. That was the comic part of it.

"Luckily she saw the joke.

" 'What a pair of boobs we are!' she sniffed. 'But you're a bigger boob than I am. You've allowed me to share your meal. You've dragged the family skeleton from the cupboard. If you'd known who I am, you would never have allowed me to cross your threshold.'

"I assured her that I was almost immorally broad-minded and challenged her to startle me.

" 'I've followed your doings for years,' she began cautiously. 'To me you've represented the dream of happiness. I've never been to Europe—never traveled. I've never had beaux. Scarcely been to a dance. The public trolley has been my automobile. Everything that you are has stood for romance. And then, your clothes! I've wanted to be pretty. I hope you don't consider me fresh.'

"She'd worked since she was fifteen, she informed me. Her first employment had been as cash girl in a department store. She'd studied at

night to become a stenographer. Having achieved that ambition, she'd continued studying. From the Y. W. C. A. she'd progressed to extension courses at Columbia University. She'd taken her certificate, or whatever they award you, in law and book-keeping. Having mastered commercialism, she'd turned her attention to culture —literature, languages, God knows what. It seemed odd to me that while I'd been chasing pants, she should have been chasing knowledge. I asked her what she'd hoped to gain by improving her mind to that extent. Her reply amazed me: 'I hoped to become a lady.' "

"Why did her answer amaze you, Mary?"

"My dear Unkie, that ought to be as prominent as the nose on your face. Ladies are uneducated. Take myself—I haven't a mind at all. The great difference between women and ladies is that women pull their weight in the world, whereas ladies are proud to be morons."

I cover her hand.

"That's not your opinion, Mary."

"Of course it's not. It's the opinion against which I'm rebelling. It's Mummy's. It's society's. A college-bred girl is sneered at by society. She's supposed to have a common streak to prefer to be a highbrow when she might be practising her

sex attraction. Knowing this, I asked my stranger why on earth, when she could gain her living honestly, she had tortured herself by the desire to become an image.

"It appeared that she had believed, poor dear, that all ladies are beloved and happy. As a lady she wouldn't have to perch in a hired bedroom and come home in the evening to loneliness. She would own a husband, a home and babies. Pathetic, wasn't it? Of course she'd found out too late what any little fool like myself could have told her—that the more a woman knows the less men appreciate her.

"I asked her how things had panned out. Was she married? No. Had she a lover? She became confused and changed the topic.

" 'It's a fairy tale that I should be sitting here beside you,' she murmured. 'Since you were launched, I've shared most of your secrets. I addressed the invitations for your coming-out party. At the present time I'm settling the bills for your wedding. This morning, when I spotted you, I was paying for the gown in which you were married.'

"Then she began to apologize. To have mailed the check would have been the routine procedure. She hadn't because she'd seized the excuse

for visiting an establishment where gowns could cost a thousand dollars. And there she'd seen me, the young princess whose good fortune she'd envied, parading as a model.

" 'But dear,' I questioned—nothing like calling a woman dear, Uncle Biff, when you're worming a secret out of her—'how did you happen to be paying my bills?'

"She hung her head. 'You fancied I was familiar. I am. I'm your father's private secretary.'

"The mountain had labored and brought forth a mouse. I almost giggled.

" 'That's all right. I won't tell him,' I consoled her.

" 'But it's for me to tell you.' She straightened. Then she seized my hands. 'I'm in love with your father.'

" 'And I won't tell him that, either,' I comforted her.

" 'You don't have to.' She was scarcely breathing. 'He adores me in return.'

"I simply stared. I was too flabbergasted to be resentful. She was too sincere to leave room for doubt. I was trying to visualize my intimidated daddy adoring this tidy woman. You know, Uncle Biff, what a sense of humor my generation

has. We scoff at ourselves—at everything. Other people's love affairs are ludicrous anyhow.

"At last I found my tongue. 'Why do you confess this to me?'

"I won't pretend to quote her words. What it came to was this: the neat little soul was willing to sacrifice herself to my interests. Her affair with my daddy was to be made a means of coercing him. If he refused to do his duty by me, she would threaten to approach my mother and expose him.

" 'But it won't come to that,' she added. 'He calls me his conscience.'

"For the first time in my experience, Uncle Biff, I was face to face with nobility. I can guess your judgment of her, but picture how she appeared to me. I'd been deserted, short-changed, bullied. I'd done my crying in private, pretending in public that I was as bold as I was painted. Do you imagine I stopped to criticize her? I was burning in hell; she alone, of all the hypocrites who'd left me to die of thirst, had risked burning herself to place water on my tongue. I'm becoming biblical, poetic—all the things that my generation high-hats. You're free to tell me I have a slate sliding. I let her go without

expressing my thanks; when she'd gone, I realized what she'd done for me. I believed in goodness again. She was a whiter woman than my mummy. My daddy wasn't worthy of her. She'd proved to me that all people aren't rotters."

"You're exaggerating, Mary," I strive to tone her down. "You can't expect me to allow your disparagement to pass unchallenged. What you've told me makes my entire life seem futile. I was in love with your mother before she knew your father. I've never ceased to be in love with her. I've played the game by both of them scrupulously. Your bitterness is understandable. But you're actually rejoicing that your father is a double-crosser."

"Bosh! Who's exaggerating now?" She flicks one knee over the other. "Get down to tin tacks. Who did the double-crossing first? I grant you Mummy has been physically faithful to Daddy; but what's that worth when she's sold him in every other direction? Has she ever been interested in him? Has she ever done anything but use him? It would have been better for her soul if she'd done a bunk with someone else, but she's never been human enough for that. In judging her I'm applying the same standard that I apply to myself. A wife's a four-flusher who compels

her husband to live with her after she's forfeited his affection and respect."

"Your views on marriage are decidedly Russian," I remark coldly.

"Dash it all!" she snaps. "A man must worship a woman to the point of suicide to marry her. He halves with her all that he possesses. He literally consigns the marring or making of his future to her manicured, idle hands. Can you conceive how prodigiously she has to fail him to wither his passion till nothing's left but indifference? That's how I failed Jeff. That's how Mummy failed Daddy. Are you too fed up to listen or can you bear the rest of my story?"

Remembering the man I'd seen in her apartment and the detectives who watch it, I nodded to her to continue.

"Nothing hair-raisingly dramatic took place at once. I went on seeing Alice. We became firm friends, which will doubtless affront you. She was impatient to recall Daddy from his holiday, but I stamped on that. There was time enough to see how he would react when in due course he discovered that I was a grass-widow."

"In the meantime you went on being a model?"

"I had to live."

"And your husband sent you nothing?"

"Why would he?" She is immediately on the defensive. "Have you forgotten my letter? How I'd lied to him that I'd married him for a meal-ticket and had a better beau in sight?"

"So your father came back from his trip," I spur her, "to find that the daughter whom he'd seen wedded in March was deserted and struggling for a livelihood."

"You've said it!" She smiles with defiant courage. "Mummy and he called to see me on the evening of their arrival. Mummy, as usual, did the talking. In her opinion I'd disgraced her. There was a lot of truth in what she said; but she jumped at conclusions. It was partly my fault, since I refused to divulge the circumstances under which Jeff and I had parted. In brief, this was her line of accusation: She'd given me every chance, obliterated herself and run her home as a free-for-all to attract suitors. By condoning my recklessness and shielding me, she'd got herself in bad with Daddy. To cap her sacrifice, she'd bankrupted herself to provide me with a record-breaking wedding. She'd never approved of my choice of Jeff, but I'd been too headstrong to borrow wisdom. And this was the result: after a feeble trial of half a year I'd discovered

that I couldn't stand him. The thought that maddened her was how the old cats would mew when the news leaked out. I was bone-selfish. I considered no one but myself. Whomever I had married, she saw plainly now, the same thing would have happened.

"Prophecies of scandals followed, ending with the verdict that from now on I must foot the bills for my own follies and look for no financial help."

"But your father was present. Wasn't his opinion consulted?" I question.

"Only indirectly. At one point she feared he was weakening, so she stiffened him by the challenge,'If your father chooses to be a soft bubble, that's his business. For my part, I wash my hands.' "

"And did he choose?" I hazard.

"Be yourself. If he had——" She draws her thumb across her slender neck. "You know where the chicken got the ax. Mummy was the chairman. Her speech over, she put nothing to the vote, invited no discussion.

" 'When you've come to your senses,' she summed up, 'and are living respectably with your husband, please inform us. Till then it will be useless to hold communication. We're going.'

"She turned to Daddy and drove him before her the way French peasants drive their ganders."

A desolate pause.

"Any complaints, Sergeant?" she inquires brightly.

I clear my throat.

"But you did get in touch with your father?"

"He got in touch with me. That was Alice's doing."

"He got in touch with you behind your mother's back," I suggest. "This person whom you call Alice threatened him with exposure."

Mary regards me pityingly.

"In their dealings with women all men are cowards, Uncle Biff. It shouldn't be necessary for me to tell you. A man who can smash a trade rival or make himself President of these United States will hide in the bathroom to avoid his wife's temper. Well, here was my poor Daddy, covering his pants with his hands for fear Mummy would spank him. She was in the wrong; he knew that. But he hadn't the guts to tell her. He was no more weak than any other daddy. I'm not chucking bricks at him. American husbands are trained to be like that; public opinion is all in women's favor. Alice was the person who saved the situation. She didn't throw

the fear of God into him. She made him see facts."

"According to your interpretation," I correct.

"Look here, Uncle Biff, I'm no squealer," Mary halts me gravely. "You don't suppose that I encouraged Alice to risk her happiness. If you do, you're not going to get away with it; I didn't. I used every argument to dissuade her. But some people are born to be martyrs. She collared Daddy in the office. She lost no chance to nag him. She didn't nag him the way Mummy does, as though she were a lion-tamer, but softly and sorrowfully, saying that she was disappointed in him. Every woman has her own method. He consented to see me if our meeting could be arranged without Mummy's knowledge."

"But your mother is the most amiable woman," I expostulate.

"We all are until you marry us," Mary grins back. "But I want you to understand my daddy. In his heart he was ashamed of his treatment of me. He was grateful to be tempted. I'm not sure, but I'm almost certain that the turning point in his temptation was when Alice warned him that I was aware of their relations.

"He came to visit me, intending to be austere. I dressed up for him. Samson had no more chance

with Delilah. If I can twist you round my finger, what didn't I do to him? To-night under the spell of my fascination you've forsworn all the pomposities you thought you held for gospel."

"Ridiculous!" I squirm. "To what are you referring?"

"To your bland reversal of opinion with regard to parents. You've assured me this evening that they're whited sepulchers. That ought to hold you," she sniggers. "But to return to our muttons, my sex lure when applied to Daddy proved devastating. He cried 'kamerad' the moment I threw my arms about him. Halfway through our session he was begging to be permitted to pay my rent and to make me an allowance. To wheedle whatever I desired from him was easier than picking pennies off a dead man's eyes. It was so easy that I didn't need to wheedle. He asked for no explanation of Jeff's conduct. My friendship with Alice wasn't mentioned. His only stipulation was that Mummy should be kept in the dark. I had him eating from my hand."

"So you gave up being a model?"

"Reluctantly, Uncle Biff. Daddy is old-fashioned. It wounded his pride that I should work."

I had been thinking furiously. Were I to broach the subject, it must be now or never.

"Mary, don't explain if you can't with credit to yourself. On several occasions I've remarked signs of a male visitor in your apartment."

"What's discreditable about that?" She frowns with a child's puzzlement.

I shrug my shoulders.

"Is it safe? At the moment you're neither wife, maid, nor widow."

She pulls a face.

"I flattered myself I'd been so careful. What led you to suspect?"

"The smell of pipe tobacco and the sight of smoldering pipe ashes. Then one day you made me certain. It was the day you weren't well."

"You sat with me from morning till late afternoon," she takes up the running. "About five—wasn't it?—you excused yourself to sign letters. You'd promised faithfully you'd come back by seven. You broke your word. I was terribly disappointed."

I gaze at my shoes not to shame her. "You had lent me your key. My office was closed, consequently I returned a full hour earlier than you had expected. You didn't hear me enter. I

saw—— I hate to go further. The door of your bedroom was partly open."

She flings her arms about me, cooing with merriment.

"What a cute little uncle you are! You hinted at this once before, I remember. That was Daddy. I've deceived you by letting you believe that you're the only man who visits me. It was his secret. Since our friendship is forbidden, Daddy and I have become tremendous pals. Stolen waters are sweet. He's more like a lover."

This reinstatement of her character leaves me crestfallen. It makes me less necessary. I am not her only Sir Galahad. I struggle to disguise my pique with a question.

"If your conspiracy with your father is his secret, why are you revealing it to me now?"

She snuggles closer, strangely tender. All her flippancy has vanished.

"Do you remember, Uncle Biff, how our conversation started? You'd told me for the first time, what I'd always known, that you were once in love with Mummy. I'm not sure how it happened, but the next moment I was asking you whether all people of your generation were asses. You expostulated and I explained why I'd asked: because of the way in which I'd been

auctioned. You objected again and I challenged you to write a book, quoting me as a horrible example. It was to be the reflection of my naked soul—not a stitch of clothing. It was to be an accusation of your generation by mine. What I wanted to prove was that youth's flaming was your generation's doing. Yours set my generation on fire and then made long noses at it. Our task was to debunk the world of all the rot that people of your age have written about mine."

"That's right," I endorse. "Your biography was to fall into six parts: your coming-out, engagement, wedding, honeymoon, and separation. But that makes only five. One's missing."

She presses her smooth cheek against mine.

"It's still missing. You're forgetting. I had to live the sixth before it could be narrated."

"But why the affection, Mary?"

"It isn't lived yet. We've brought our record up to date. We've no further excuse—— Can't you guess what I'm trying to hint to you?"

Her voice is shaky. Tears fill her eyes.

I think I read what's in her mind. She believes that now she won't be interesting—that I've been using her as copy.

"Little goose, I haven't been visiting you in order to write about you," I baby her. "Our

collaboration has been no more than a recreation. You and only you are the attraction."

"We've got a kick out of being alone together, I'm not denying." Rising, she plucks a carnation from a vase and arranges it in my buttonhole.

"Very nice of you," I pat her.

"Till the sixth part has been lived, this has to be our last meeting," she astonishes me.

"Nonsense, Mary?"

Pressed for a reason, she turns her face away. "I'm not as hard-boiled as you fancy and you're a bachelor."

I try to argue. "You've learned to expect me. You'll think better of this to-morrow."

"I won't. Don't fool yourself."

And she didn't. On the morrow when I phoned, she refused to speak with me. The day after when I called at her apartment, the door was opened on the chain. At sight of me she closed it: "I told you not to."

I grope for motives. What did she mean by, "I'm not as hard-boiled as you fancy and you're a bachelor"? The obvious interpretation that springs to one's mind is that she's in love with me. But that's absurd; consider the discrepancy in our age. There's a second interpretation: she

may imagine that I'm in love with her. Knowing what I do of her, I'm certain she would reckon herself insulted were I not in love with her. Then perhaps she, too, has noticed the mysterious automobile that follows whenever I approach her house. She's afraid of compromising me. She doesn't care for herself. To think well of herself is all that matters. But she is aware how my generation shivers at the ill opinion of others. That's the solution of her strange behavior; by forbidding me her companionship she's shielding me from detectives.

Mary has grown to be a habit. I'm restless without her. When I wake, I start wondering what is lacking. I try to compensate for her lack by wandering in her vicinity. These excursions take place after nightfall. Nine times out of ten I'm annoyed by the automobile coasting behind me. I'm past caution. I no longer count the cost or how deeply I may involve myself in her affairs.

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Since the above was written Christmas has come and gone. The new year has progressed almost to the anniversary of Mary's wedding. I had given up hope of completing her story, when

an event took place as illumining as the eruption of a volcano.

I was bound on my customary resultless errand, patrolling her neighborhood on the chance of encountering her. I had drawn level with Mildred Mansions. A flurry of snow was falling, blurring street lamps so that objects could be perceived only at a short distance. The hour I judged to be approaching midnight, when out of the wall of whiteness a car pulled to the curb. A man tense with excitement leaped to the pavement. I was preparing to prevent him from snatching my wallet, when without preliminaries he addressed me.

"You're Mary's friend."

"And if I am?"

"You can give me news of her."

"Why should I?"

"I'm her husband."

I scrutinize him closely.

"A hell of a husband! She's through with you."

"So she wrote me."

"Then what earthly right——"

"No right, except that I'm not through with her."

"So you're the scoundrel," I burst out, "whom

I've mistaken for a detective! What's been your game in following me?"

"While I knew you were protecting her, I felt sure she was safe. But she doesn't admit you any longer. You're in my category. You prowl the streets the way I do, hoping that her shadow may fall across the panes and torturing yourself with conjectures."

"You've been hounding me," I bluster, "in order that you may pin something on me."

"For Pete's sake!" His annoyance at my idiocy amounts almost to contempt. "Give me a chance. Haven't you noticed what's been happening tonight? I'm desperate. Step into my car. Let me drive you to where we can talk."

"You're without honor," I scorn him. "How do I know that your motive isn't to create a scandal?"

He makes a weary gesture.

"You're no meek Moses. If I attacked you, which is unthinkable, I should get as good as I gave. I need your help. How can I convince you? You stuck to Mary when I failed her. We have at least this in common: both of us would lay down our lives for her."

"You've shown no signs of such devotion," I taunt him.

He flings wide the door of his car.

"Do me justice. Hear my side." Taking my consent for granted, "Where shall I drive you?"

"To my house," I answer gruffly.

The servants have retired. I am compelled to act host. Grudgingly I set out the mixings for a highball, stir the fire and sign to him to seat himself.

"You consider the atmosphere tainted by my presence," he suggests.

"You state my emotions mildly." I take a sip from my glass. "A man who marries in order to be kept is the lowest thing that crawls."

"I agree with you; but I didn't."

I frown across at him. He hasn't the appearance of a villain. I had expected to find him changed for the worse. If I didn't know what I do, I might think him a clean, fresh boy, even purposeful.

"If you didn't marry Mary to be kept," I stab at him, "why did you leave her?"

"You're putting the cart before the horse," he remonstrates. "Won't you be fair? I married her because if I had asked her to wait, some other fellow might have nipped in ahead of me. As for leaving her, that was done at her request."

"Kindergarten tosh!" I retort. " 'Whom God

hath joined.' Marriage isn't an afternoon call. I've shivered in the trenches. You can guess what would have been the verdict on a deserter whose excuse for running away was that his lieutenant had been impolite!"

"You're accusing me of cowardice," he speaks unresentfully. "I'd lost my job. I had nothing with which to support her. She did the leaving. I'd gone to consult my father. When I returned, I found a letter. What was in it is my concern."

"I happen to know." I flick the ash from my cigar. "You seem entirely incapable of viewing yourself in perspective. You were married to a girl in a million—charm, social position, beauty. Neither you nor any man could have rightly deserved her. She was a gift from the gods. What beats me is how you mustered the impertinence ——" My own amazement renders me inarticulate. "I'd as soon chuck away the Kohinoor Diamond. Didn't you realize your good fortune? Not to have been able to get along with her was preposterous."

"I could have. His eyes plead for tolerance. "But I didn't seek you, sir, to drag up the past. What's happening to her now is so much more important."

"What's happening to her now is the result

of the past," I thwart his effort to short-circuit. "You say you could have got along with her. What prevented?"

"Since you insist!" He shrugs his shoulders. "But I warn you; an inquisition of this sort is untimely. She may be dying."

"She may." I refuse to be balked by heroics. "It's more probable that having thanked her God that she's rid of you, she's snuggled in her nice warm bed."

"Our getting along was never in dispute," he continues. "If our families had kept their hands off, we could have done that till the cows came home. My family was bad enough; hers was abominable. Her mother's a cat. Do you know her intimately?"

"Well enough, years ago, to have believed I was engaged to her."

"Lucky man to have escaped. It's not too late, I trust, to offer you my congratulations."

I am preparing to say something stinging. He romps on, earnest and cocksure.

"Our families interfered with us unmercifully. I suppose we'd each been the white-haired child. They felt themselves deprived by our marriage and revenged themselves by trying to smash it. Her side criticized me; my side criti-

cized her. They were half-wits picking wings off flies. And it was done with such a bewhiskered air of benevolence!"

"No need to waste your oratory." I reach for a second cigar. "This is a rehash of what Mary has already told me. I notice that everyone's been to blame but yourself; so here's news that ought to shame you. You couldn't find a stronger advocate than Mary. She's an imbecile the way she defends you. Whether she requested you to leave or you did a bunk on your own account doesn't affect your cause. When the boat was sinking, you waved her an inglorious farewell. Besides spying on friends who shouldered your responsibilities, what have you accomplished since you deserted her?"

His first sentence corroborates Mary: his father had promised to stake him, if Mary's people staked her. But when his father had learned that Mary had lit out, he had adopted the rôle of Jehovah. Experience was the only profitable schoolmaster; were he to help his son, he would be robbing him of the bitter fruit of his lesson. Before he pledged the extent of his assistance, his son must work out his own salvation.

"What it amounted to," Jeff remarks acutely, "was that he would help me the moment I didn't

need his help. A generous old slob, wasn't he?"

I remember Mary's inquiry as to whether all people of my generation are asses.

"Well," I prompt her husband, "here you were sans wife, sans home, sans job. A pretty mess after your highfalutin wedding!"

"And trained for nothing," he emphasizes the gloom of his situation.

"It took the stuffing out of you, I'll warrant," I chuckle.

"On the contrary," he disappoints me, "I began to cast about for a means of livelihood. Since a kid I've fooled with radio sets. I went into a factory. Was sent West to where my company does the bulk of its manufacturing. One of the bosses noticed me, proving that there are still good Samaritans in the world. He invited me to his home, found out that I was college-bred, speeded me up, put pep into me. Soon I was promoted to be a salesman, sent East and allotted a territory. I've made good. My father's welcome to bestow his charity on some other guy's misfit. I'm on the road up."

"Meanwhile," I dart a finger at him, "for all you cared Mary might have starved. As it was, to feed herself she had to seek employment. You're mighty complacent in your self-admira-

tion; but your success hasn't benefited her. Not a dollar have you sent her."

"Stick to facts. How could I?" he protests long-sufferingly. "You've hinted that you know what was in that letter. She wrote that she'd married me because I was a rich man's son and could support her in the luxury to which she'd been accustomed. The way she put it was that she'd grabbed me for a meal-ticket, only to find that I couldn't keep a roof over her head. It was unfortunate that she should have chosen that word meal-ticket. My mother had drummed it into me, 'She married you for a meal-ticket, Jeff.' I'm not asking you to be lenient, sir; I don't need you to tell me that I was a sap, a bonehead —everything that's opprobrious. But consider my provocation. My parents had never approved of my wife. They'd coached me to expect disaster. They'd collected and poured into my ears every malicious morsel of tittle-tattle. I'd lost my job and Mary had gone back on me. All the bad news which they had prophesied was confirmed. Mary herself added the last straw: she scribbled that she was off to Atlantic City with an unnamed rival."

"You misguided ass!" Leaping to my feet, I straddle the fireplace. "From what you've re-

vealed of yourself this evening, you're not natively sensitive. Since you entered this house, I've never stopped insulting you, yet you've shown no inclination to reclaim your coat and hat."

He must have guessed that I was beginning to cotton to him.

"What ought I to have done?"

"Done!" I exclaim. "Gone after her. Clutched her by the hair. She was worth fighting for."

"Cave-man tactics!" He shakes his head. "They're out of date. I hope you'll pardon me, but you belong to an old-fashioned generation."

Nothing riles me more than patronizing references to my age. All these cubs—and I'm including Mary—expect me to don sack-cloth when they remind me of their modernity.

"Old-fashioned be damned!" I splutter. "Are hyenas, elephants, and apes old-fashioned? Visit a zoo and test your theories on a lion. Deprive him of his mate and see whether he's modern. People of your age make me sick. Because you're ineffectual and thin-blooded, you pin compliments to all your errors. I say you acted like a cad; you tell me you were animated by delicacy."

"I was," he defies me. "You're losing sight of the fact that women show as much of their legs as men these days. Coeducation has emanci-

pated them. They despise us; politically they're our equals, intellectually they reckon themselves our superiors. They play cards for higher stakes. They smoke like fanatics. They carry their own hip-flasks. When they deign to mate, they demand the option to retain their maiden names and to travel on separate passports. American women have pushed the absurdity so far that, when they lasso a foreigner, they stick to their own nationality. The result is anarchy. No sense in kicking; if you're a diplomat you pretend to applaud. A husband to-day is an unpaid chauffeur, a gigolo, a camp follower. At best he gratifies the queen bee's maternal instinct; at worst he saves her the expense of tipping a porter. He strips himself of all decision; henceforth she decides every detail of his life. By gosh, if she prefers Camels, it's up to him to change his brand. She owns him body and soul; her body and soul remain her private property. If she divorces him, she still gets the bulge on him. Who ever heard of a wife paying her husband alimony? You may ask why a chap who's free is such a simp as to walk into the trap with his eyes wide open. He doesn't. He goes temporarily blind. He sees the girl he desires in a distorted perspective as an exception to all her sex. When the cataracts have

been removed by the operation of a honeymoon, he discovers that she's an un-shop-soiled edition of his mother-in-law."

"May I halt your flow to remind you," I interrupt, "that in your hatred of your mother-in-law you're not as modern as you fancy?"

"What I was about to say," he rushes on, scarcely heeding me, "is that the rewards of marriage are a mirage. At first a thirsty husband refuses to be disillusioned. He tries to educate his wife to fulfil his dreams of romance by proffering her chivalry. The poor dub doesn't realize that he became a workaday habit the moment he slipped the ring on her finger. I suppose that's what women mean when they claim that they're so adaptable. You sneered at me for turning tail when I was convinced that I wasn't wanted. I was a dog trained to obedience. Mary's letter yelled that she'd lost her taste for me. If I wasn't to change from a gentleman to a bully, I had no choice but to buzz off. *Voilà!*"

"Of all the anæmic mush!" I pass my hand across my forehead. "Yesterday you were in your cradles; to-day you're rewriting the New Testament. If these are your views, why are you haunting her?"

"Because I don't care what she's done—whom she's lived with. I can't live without her."

His shoulders slump. His face is hidden. Of a sudden I feel remorse.

"Boy," I touch him, "that's the first genuine sentiment you've uttered. Mary didn't mean a word of her letter. She's straight as the day you met her."

He looks up.

"Say that again."

"I'm telling you that she loved you to the point of sacrificing herself for you. She removed herself from your path. She'd persuaded herself she was hindering you."

He's on his feet.

"Then good-night."

"Where are you going?" I pull out my watch. "D'you know the time? It's three o'clock."

"I'm going to her." A hesitancy flits across his face. "But that was what I came to ask you—where can I find her?"

"At Mildred Mansions."

"Not any longer."

He explains why he had accosted me. He'd seen an ambulance drawn up at her apartment house—someone carried out. That it might be Mary had been his instant thought. He had

darted round to the back; her windows were in darkness. He had dared to ring her bell and had obtained no answer.

"Was it Mary?" he asks in panic.

"Extremely unlikely," I assure him. "Probably she had a social engagement. You can't risk waking her to inquire. Better sleep with me the night."

Before breakfast he has conducted his own researches. I am scanning the stock quotations when he bursts in on me.

"I've rung her bell. She doesn't answer."

"You're losing your head. Let's do things decently," I try to calm him.

My idea of doing things decently is to call on her father. When I'm shown in, he has the sallow look of one who hasn't slept.

"So you're alone, Harry! Where's your wife?" I open negotiations.

"Lilian is across the Atlantic." He stabs at a plate of ham and eggs. "She's heard of a new quack who by injecting silkworms' blood into her veins can help her to knock off twenty pounds."

"You're pleased to be facetious." I pull up a chair. "Anyway, I'm glad she's absent."

"So am I." He pours himself a cup of coffee. "I can visit Mary now without wearing sneakers."

"I'm glad she's absent for a totally different reason. I'm here to speak about the woman you're keeping."

I wasn't. When I'd entered, nothing had been further from my thoughts. It was the inspiration of the moment. If I could put him in the wrong, I could shame him into helping me to reunite Jeff and Mary.

"Is that so?" He raises to me eyes as unrevealing as oysters.

"Her name is Alice." I pedal furiously. "I'm deeply shocked, Harry. If you were going to cheapen your wife in this fashion, you ought to have let me have her."

"I didn't know I was," he mumbles, his mouth full of ham and eggs.

"What's infinitely worse," I continue, "is your treatment of your only child. When she married you paid her her wages up to date, as though she were a departing domestic. She left your house without financial provision. When she applied to you for help, your plea was that she'd cleaned you out. Your conduct has been mon-

strous. You were too strapped to enable your daughter to remain married; but you weren't too strapped to play the sugar-daddy."

"You're moral this morning." His tone is as uncontentious as if I'd asked him for a two-cent stamp. "You've been kind to Mary. For that reason, if for no other, I'm willing to furnish you with any explanations you require. I haven't much time. So fire."

"What about your relations with this woman?"

"They've been entirely proper. Probably you doubt the statement. I'll modify it; our liaison has been mental. If you ask me whether I'm in love with her, I am. A husband gets tired of being exploited and managed. I count for something in Alice's life. Do you get that? For one thing she understands my business. For another she respects my judgment. She shares my occupations for eight hours out of every day. My wife has never shared them. In any year, owing to my wife's social activities, preservation of her beauty, flights to cures, etc., she spends much less time in my company than Alice. I resigned myself to her indifference, vanity, extravagance till Mary had landed a husband; after that the necessity for resignation was ended. That's our secret,

Biff—yours and mine. My rebellion has been so tactful that a woman of Lilian's obtuseness hasn't even yet fallen in to it. I still sign checks, so she's persuaded I'm contented."

He glances up with a momentary twinkle.

"The joke's on me, Biff. Don't miss its fine points. Lilian regards me with so little seriousness that when I raise the standard of revolt, she thinks I'm a child playing roughly. Yet I'm the sun that rises and shines on Alice. Queer, isn't it, that the same man can be that for one woman and not for another?"

"For some time"—curiosity diverts me from my errand—"I've been aware, Harry, that things weren't as they should be between you and Lilian. With the romantic feelings I harbor for her, I've been at a loss to account——"

"Let me be more explicit," he breaks in on me. "Till forty a good-looking wife can hold her husband, however badly she abuses him. She holds him by her sex allurement. She shoves it at him like a stick of chocolate. 'If you're good, you can taste it. If you're naughty, you shan't taste it.' After forty a man becomes fed up by such teasing. He begins to doubt whether she has a stick of chocolate to offer. If she has, she can keep it. He wants peace and companionship.

Sex allurement begins to wear an idiot aspect. And there's another fact, Biff, to which I invite your attention: women age faster than men. They're mature and most valuable at twenty. A man isn't mature and doesn't reach his full value till he's well along the road to fifty. Wives are silly goats, if you come to think of it, to ride us harder when their charms are becoming negligible than they did when their beauty was at its first freshness. What the devil do I care, for instance, whether Lilian gains or loses twelve pounds, when none of my hopes or fears are remotely shared by her? I scarcely flatter myself that she regards me as a habit. However, don't let my grumblings spoil your illusion. What's your next question?"

"Mary. I believe you're reconciled to her now. But why did you behave to her so cruelly?"

He butters himself a slice of toast.

"I'm glad you visited me, Biff, though I wasn't in the least pleased to see you at first. So the problem of Mary has puzzled you! I'll try to be brief. You remember how we both adored her when she was tiny? We weren't much more than boys ourselves. We used to meet down town and dash home together to play hide-and-seek with her before she went to bed. Do you

remember something else—that our games always stopped when her mother entered? Lilian couldn't bear competition; if there was any affection going, she had to focus it. As Mary grew older and became a personality, her mother, not loving her as I did, pushed me to the wall and took control of her. If I attempted to guide the child, I was spoiling her prospects. My job, as usual, was to provide the money. I guess I got sore. Mary, too, seemed to have gone back on me. I had hoped that she would fill the gap in my loneliness. That she should have adopted her mother's meager view of me was bad; but when they started to raise Cain with their parties, my life became a nightmare. I set a period to their nonsense. I would make a clean sweep the day Mary was married."

"You were brutal." I lean my arms on the table.

"I'm not denying it. I didn't know whom to trust. I'd lived surrounded by critics and smiling enemies. To assert myself I struck out wildly and hit the wrong person. To my surprise my wife applauded my violence. She asserted that she, too, had been a victim of Mary's rapacity. She goaded me on to extremes of sternness. Mary herself has told you the rest."

"How's she getting along?" I question. "As you're probably aware, for some inscrutable reason, she's refused to see me lately."

"I should think she would." Harry pauses to frown in lighting a cigarette. "She's modern, but she still retains some reticence."

"Why be reticent with me? No one could suspect me of necking."

"My dear Biff, if modernity is measured by lack of delicacy, you are modernity's last word."

Shaken to my foundations, I plead for understanding.

"I've advised Mary. I've encouraged her confessions. But never intentionally have I been indelicate."

"Then we'll set your error down to bad taste," Harry gets a little of his own back. "Since evidently you're not aware of what occurred last night, why are you intruding? To be frank you couldn't have chosen a more inappropriate morning."

"I've chosen the first that was suitable," I bridle. "Last night from Jeff's lips I heard the unvarnished story."

"Of what?" Harry moves toward the door, hinting at departure.

"Of why he left Mary. You must listen. Your child's happiness hangs in the balance."

He comes slowly back.

"The unvarnished story, eh! Let's have it."

I relate in condensed form the damage wrought by Mary's letter.

"So while you were philandering and your wife was preserving her figure, these poor kids were floundering."

"You look tired, Biff." He shows me consideration, resting his hand on my shoulder.

"I ought to be. I've been up half the night."

"That's nothing. I haven't been to bed at all," he surprises me.

"How's that?"

"Mary. She was taken ill. She's at the hospital."

"Then Jeff was right!" I dive for my coat and hat. "Which hospital? How serious is she? Come across with the facts. Her husband's waiting at my house."

"You bachelors take the biscuit!" Harry mocks me. "Where were your eyes? How could she have had you calling! She's had a baby."

"A baby!" I gasp. "Then she's been asking for Jeff!"

"Not noticeably. Mary isn't a quitter. She sticks to her bargain."

"Then by all that's sacred, this is the time she doesn't. You mayn't know it, but you're accompanying me as guide."

We collect Jeff. He's pacing my library when we burst in on him. No good beating about the bush.

"You were dead right about that ambulance," I apprise him. "Get a move on. You're a father."

In the car as we drive, he and Harry renew their acquaintance. At the hospital we're kept dallying. Doctor's permissions have to be granted. Jeff's relation is explained. He alone is admitted.

What Mary said to him, or whether a reconciliation was necessary, God knows—and He's not telling. When Jeff returned his face was shining.

"The elevator whisked you up to the Mount of Transfiguration," I joke him.

He's in a daze.

"Is that the name of this hospital?"

I insist that he stay with me. It is not safe to allow a man who has conversed with angels to stroll at large through this wicked world. But my motives are not wholly magnanimous. My

only chance of sharing Mary is to place her husband under an obligation. Via him I learn that she is anxious to see me. I refuse—probably because in common with most men of my generation, I have the virgin-complex. Now that she is a mother, I fear she may be changed. To meet her in normal surroundings will be less painful.

Meanwhile Jeff discusses plans. His income won't stretch to magnificence. Trying to be worthy of their wedding presents produced their cropper. The most that he can afford is a three-room apartment. Having found one to his liking, he commences removing furniture.

The day Mary comes out of hospital happens to be her wedding anniversary. We have planned to hold a celebration. My contribution is flowers. Her father, whose belated offer of an allowance has been rejected, has insisted on attending to the other details.

I start for the rendezvous a little ahead of time. The new love-nest, the nearer I approach it, strikes me as being well beyond the zone of the remotely fashionable. My suspicion is confirmed. The apartment house has no elevator. It is occupied, were one to canvass, by struggling clerks and superior mechanics.

Mary answers my ring—a Mary etherealized to the purity of a madonna. But there's nothing madonna-like in her greeting.

"You old dub! After refusing to visit me, you steal a march on all of them."

"I had to, Mary—had to in order to get used to you. I'd nearly kidded myself you belonged to me."

"I do, Uncle Biff."

I shake my head, with what I conceive to be a comic imitation of despair.

"You've escaped me. I'm bewildered. When you were born, I had the same sensations regarding your mother."

"But you haven't seen our Screech Owl," she jacks me up sensibly.

She leads the way down a narrow passage to a sun-filled bedroom, which instantly becomes dainty by reason of her presence.

"Don't look at me, Uncle Biff," she chides me; "look at her. This is the Cat's Miaow. Isn't she a quaint little guy?"

She plunks a bundle in my arms unceremoniously and grins at my embarrassment.

"You've got to like her the way you've liked me," she urges. "You've got to save her the way you've saved me, when I become a bad mother."

The child begins to make noises as though joining in our conversation.

"There you are!" I smile at Mary. "She's complaining of you already. You've passed on; she's usurped your place as the younger generation. But seriously, what do you intend to do with her?"

"Stick a bottle in her mouth as often as seems necessary."

"I didn't mean that, Mary. When Jeff grows rich, as he will either by his own efforts or by inheriting his father's fortune, do you intend to launch her on society, auction her and train her to chase pants, as her mother did before her?"

"May I be switched if I do. Haven't I been snatched as a brand from the burning?"

A key grates in the latch.

"Hello, old Bum." She tilts back her glowing face to embrace her husband. "Uncle Biff and I have been sentimentalizing. We've agreed that you're much too good for me and that the Cat's Miaow is out of sight too precious to be entrusted to either of us."

With which generous misstatement, phrased in the new jargon of tenderness, this record of Mary Angel's regeneration is ended.

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